Stanley Harrison

GOOD TO BE ALIVE

THE STORY OF JACK BRENT

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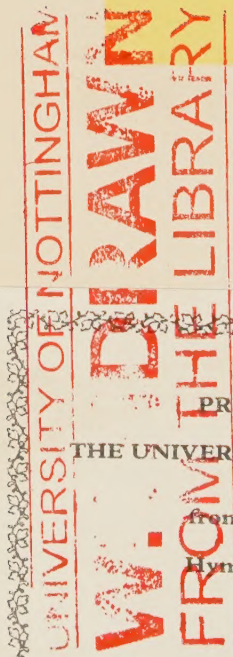

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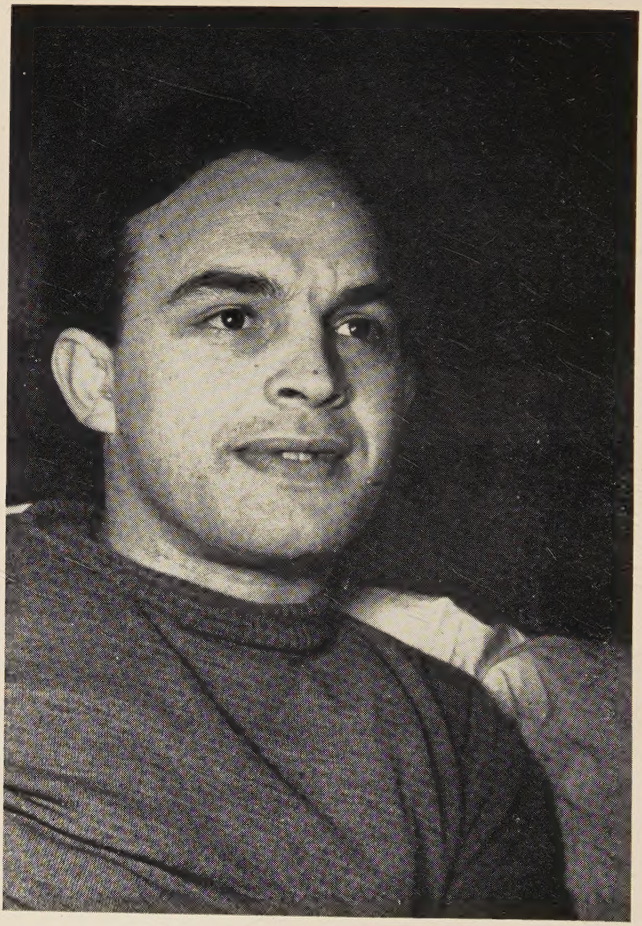

Jack Brent, 1912–1951

GOOD to be ALIVE

The Story of Jack Brent

by

STANLEY HARRISON

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The story is based on letters from Jack Brent (George Dickie), recollections by his family and friends, and the records of the International Brigade Association.

Chapter I

TERRIBLE STOUT WEAN

> My favourite hero was a man whose name was Jack Brent. He was a real living man. I have met him lots of times. It was in the year 1937 he went to fight. His wounds didn't heal. He had one of his legs taken off and the other he could not walk with. But in spite of all his pain he was as cheerful as anybody could be, often more cheerful. He used to give Johnny Crome and me rides on the back of his motor chair. We always had great fun with Jack.
>
> (*From a school essay by Brett Elliott, aged 12, September, 1951.*)

THERE sometimes arise from among the people men whom all recognise as the heroic children of their time and age. Such a man was Jack Brent. His was a life of rare courage even in the teeming record of the many sons of the people reared and formed by the socialist and working-class movement.

This is his story, compiled from recollections of his friends and from his letters.

He was twenty-four when he volunteered for the International Brigade and received a severe wound in the front line at Jarama, defending Madrid. A fifteen-year battle for life followed which for others might have been a task taking all their vital energies. But not for Jack.

He was a man who bore the full impact of the stormy thirty-nine years through which he lived. A childhood beset by poverty. The long, vain hunt for work. War that crippled him. Every handicap of upbringing and environment that injustice can ordain. Nothing shielded him.

Yet his triumph was complete; to meet him was to feel alive, to know him was to learn, to pity him impossible.

Returning to England, he became a leader and a representative man of the world-wide movement that kept faith with the betrayed people of Spain and worked on for their liberation.

His friends present this record in personal tribute, and also in the conviction that his history has deep meaning for a generation hungry as he was for knowledge and happiness. How eagerly he would always link these two.

It is dedicated as he might have wished, to the memory of the 500 Britons who died fighting in the ranks of the Brigade—in the bitter, sorrowful and glorious first engagement fought by the peoples of the world against fascism.

Of his childhood and early youth when his parents left him to a grandmother's care in the Scottish village of Whithorn, Jack spoke rarely. They were years of hardship, of a poor life often close to starvation—but also of a warm-hearted will to live flowing from the woman, early-widowed and still young, who took his mother's place. Jack's brother John remembers: "She couldna read or write or anything like that. All her work and toil was for us, she thought there was nothing like us."

Long before leaving school Jack was at work, as messenger boy, milk boy, farm help and harvest hand. At the age of thirteen, with the rudiments of a truant village schooling and some snatches of Burns in his head, he was apprenticed to a butcher.

He threw the job up when he was seventeen and ran away to join the Army, this being, as he later said, the only apparent way of getting away from the village into the wide world. He fled from poverty's dullness, from years filled with a bare struggle to exist.

Only in later years did his feelings about the early days dissolve in that simple humanity and good cheer that made him so strong a fire of friendship. And the past was by then graven on him not in bitterness but in determination to change conditions which are the ordinary fate of millions.

They were hard years—but of a hardness known to many, and they stamped the man.

Here in words spoken by his brother long after is a picture of

how the family lived after settling in the village in the summer of 1912. Jack had been born in Canada earlier that year.

"We were in Canada about five months. Uncle George was in a factory, Uncle James was working, Uncle William, I think, was on the railway lines. We all lived in the one house. I can just remember it—it was a wooden building with a round stove sitting in the middle of the floor and a pipe going up through the roof.

"There was a split some way among them and James and the old woman and me and Geordie [Jack] came back. The old woman had an awful job getting milk heated to put in Geordie's bottles on the boat. We lay in the one bunk and I aye lay at the porthole, and I mind waking in the morning with my face at the porthole and seeing the great expanse of water.

"The house we came to in Whithorn had only one room down the stair and two rooms up. It was sold lately for £25—so you'll ken the sort it was. When we were wee she used to sit at the fire at nights and Geordie would be on her knee, and she used to sing to us, old songs like Loch Lomond and Comin' thro' the Rye, a ween of old songs.

"She was wee and very very fair, hair kind of golden, and she used to tell me that when she was young it hung down to her waist very near.

"She aye tellt me that her mother had a big family, she was the oldest and at that time they had to pay a penny a week for their education I think.

"She would tell us about the struggles she had bringing up her own family. Her husband was an awful drinker and she never drew a week's pay from him in her life. He was in the Boer War and died six weeks after he came out.

"She reckoned that if the doctor had said the war was the cause of his death, she would have got assistance to bring up her six weans, but he said it was natural causes so she got nothing. She was offered the poor house.

"I think she said she took one child on her back and two by the hand to the seashore to gather whelks, and the oldest used to help her to gather them. We could never understand how she had such a struggle when the people that did no work at all seemed to live on the best.

"When Geordie was wee I think she took in washing and sold scones and that, and she used to knit socks for the shops, 9*d*. a pair, as well as working through the day. When she was going out she aye pinned him to the pillow in case he would slip down and get smothered. He was always a terrible stout wean.

"She used to carry him out to the harvest field and lay him down at the stook and I would be making 'straps' for her, and he would be sitting at the stook. When he was getting bigger she used to take us singling turnips and let us sit at the end of the drills, singling at the ends. He would be more or less sitting at the end and I would be giving him a piece now and then. Then of course when he was at the school she was out washing through the day, and whenever school was finished for the day she had him out to the fields. We were just getting a substantial meal at each end of the day, and at dinner time we were just getting a cup of tea made by our next-door neighbour.

"We used to be sitting waiting on the old woman coming in at night to see whether she had any wee bits of trousers or socks or anything as well as her two shillings may be. During the early part of our life we used to go to the school in our bare feet. Geordie had a pair of lassies' boots to go to the school—she would have got them from some of the houses where she worked.

"We had an uncle, George, he saved a bit, and he had a bit of money about him. He was a grieve on a farm, and he came nearly every Sunday and he aye brought her a bit of farm butter or a dozen eggs.

"And I mind of the other uncle we called the Cobbler making a pair of shoes for my grandmother, and they were like men's shoes, and Geordie got them to wear at the school. We never had suits of clothes. Our rig-out was a wee cheap jersey and a

pair of trousers she made out of an old skirt or maybe got them from some other body.

"She bathed us every Sunday in a big zinc bath. She was awful cleanly. When she was coming in at night I have seen her having to scrub her whole house out.

"We aye had a pillow fight in bed on Sunday morning, and when the old woman came in it was all feathers met her. My uncle who used to come to see her on a Sunday—he was awful well doing. He wasn't in the house five minutes before she was sitting on one side of the fire and him on the other and out came this tale of woe—'Thae boys could dae with a pair o' baits and a pair o' troosers'—and in the finish he gave her half a crown. She aye got half a crown from him on Sundays.

"She was very, very kind-hearted—she would aye be found where there was trouble. There wouldna be a working-class wean born in the town without her being there. Once when the youngster was born a doctor was there and he started to pack his bag and the old woman said, 'I don't think ye need go now, I think there's more to come,' and sure enough it was a couple of bonnie wee lassies. That was a tale she was never tired of relating.

"After Geordie left school he was for a short time pulling sugar beet. It was so cold in the mornings with the frost on the leaves, some of the children were greetin' with the cold. The beets had to be pulled up and all the green part had to be cut off them, and him being left-handed it was very awkward, because it was always a right-handed person was teaching you how to do it. A left-handed person would have to stand on the other side of the drill; and he got a sair cut in the thumb.

"After that he went to serve his time at the butchering, and he used to get some sair cuts at that too. He stuck that for about three year, then one whole holiday he got up and put his best suit on and told the old woman that he was going out with the butcher in the car. When he got late that afternoon and didn't come back, she got alarmed and she went up the stair to his room

and found a note to say he had went away to join the army. She was in a state then all right. The next word we had was from Inverness, he had joined the Cameron Highlanders.

"He had six months' training at Inverness. He came back for his leave, and he was telling us how well he was getting on, but I kent fine he didn't like it then. But he didn't like to admit he had made a mistake, and he said it was a great life.

"He was a real bloody toff in the kilt—he used to get up at seven and he wasn't ready to go out till twelve. He was washing his sporran and combing it, and blanco-ing his belt and gaiters. He wouldn't go up the town unless everything was perfect. He was an advert for the army all right—by Christ he was a braw boy.

"He went back to Edinburgh after that. That's where he ran into his first bit of bother. He got 14 days detention for being absent on guard.

"He got into a sports team, and they used to make a lot of money—they got hired out to wee towns to give a display. In the summer they were most of their time training for that, and they maybe got 10*s.* at the end of the day, and they were well fed and that. And he was always very fit; and he took up boxing, and he reached the finals for his weight. Then he met a fellow who had been a boxer in Civvy Street, and he was knocked out in the final.

"He went from Edinburgh to Aldershot. One night they were celebrating, two three of the boys, and he was on guard, and he got 96 days in the glasshouse for having drink on guard. He told me when he came back that he seen big stout fellows going in there, ten or twelve stone, and coming out about eight stone. Everything was done at the double with full kit on.

"He tried all sorts of manœuvres to dodge a bit of time. First he started complaining about a pain in his side—he was trying to get his appendix out, but I don't think that was very successful. Then he started complaining of his feet—when he was a wean

Joined the Cameron Highlanders

he wore the old woman's shoes, and he always blamed that for his two wee toes being crossed over the other ones. He wanted his two wee toes cut off, but that was just to delay time too.

"When he did come out of the glasshouse, they made him a lance-corporal and put him in charge of a clothing store, where they kept civilian clothes. He made it up with another chap to clear out, so he picked himself a civilian suit and took one for the other boy. That was when he took a week-end ticket to London.

"The police came up to the house and warned us that if ever he came back he was to be reported or we would be held responsible.

"It must have been about 1933 that he did come back. He had hitch-hiked, and he walked from Girvan home. On the way he knocked at the doors for food, but I think they wouldn't give him much. He got his first cigarette at Sorbie, and he was so dizzy he almost fell. He landed in about midnight, and one of his shoes was worn through the sole, sock and all, and he was walking on the bare foot.

"We kept him hid up the stair for about a week. Even our nearest relatives didn't ken he was home—that includes Mrs. Steele, she just lives next door, and she was in and out all the time, and she didn't ken for years.

"I gave him all the money I could give him, ten shillings, and the Cobbler walked about a mile out of the town with him so that nobody would see him getting on the bus. And he got the bus to Stranraer and that was the last we saw of him for about ten years."

Chapter II

DARK VALLEY

There's a valley in Spain called Jarama,
It's a place that we all know so well,
For 'twas there that we gave of our manhood
And most of our brave comrades fell . . .
We have left that dark valley for ever,
But its memory we ne'er shall forget.

IN his borrowed suit, twenty-one years old, and quit of the army, he hitch-hiked to Glasgow, paid a newsboy at the station half a crown for a spent half-ticket, and was away.

For the next few years in London his story enters the shadows of life on relief, of the existence without purpose to which social and industrial crisis doomed growing millions in the early thirties.

It was the time of the Hunger Marches, of the Means Test, of giant demonstrations by the unemployed. And the period, too, when with Mosley's movement growing active in Britain and Hitler's rise to power in Germany, fascism was preparing world war as a solution for the crisis.

Little trace is left of how Jack lived in these years. He lived, like many more, from day to day and from meal to meal. He had to keep a wary eye open for the redcaps. For some time he teamed up with a bunch of Canadians and they pooled their dole and money from odd jobs in order to live. Adrift in a hostile society, Jack drew close to them, adopted bits of their breezy lingo and came to speak of himself as a Canadian. It began probably as a mannerism, a form of protest, and finally grew natural to him.

There is hazy record of some contacts with the organised movement of the unemployed workers, bringing the first glimmering of socialist ideas.

But life was his main teacher, and he appears to have been in action against capitalism and war long before his bright, clear

grasp had been attained of the task confronting the working class if a new society is to be built. "I remember him telling me", writes a miner friend of later days, Tommy Degnan, "how he came to be drawn into the struggle. He and his pal were out walking and saw a bunch of Blackshirts knocking young women about at some demonstration. Jack and his pal waded in. From then on, fascism for Jack was enemy No. 1."

Two workless years on bread and marge and his ever beloved cups of char brought him into hospital in early 1934 with a perforated ulcer and peritonitis, from which he narrowly recovered. After he came out he got his first regular job since leaving the army—washer-up at a hotel. He was at this trade, off and on, for two years, graduating, as he never tired of boasting, to be a "mighty fine chef".

Sitting late into the morning in a boarding house somewhere in London, he had long discussions with fellow lodgers over innumerable cups of tea and the workers' own newspaper, the new-born *Daily Worker*.

And in July, 1936, when he was working at a lunch bar near London, came the event out of which young Brett's hero and real living man was to be born. Spain's fascist generals rose in rebellion against the Spanish Republic. They struck their blow in league with the British people's enemies, Hitler and Mussolini.

Five months later Jack made his first attempt to join the volunteers who were moving from all over the world to the aid of Spanish democracy. "So began the only period of my life", he wrote later, "which I like to think has been worth while".

He gave several reasons for his decision. There was the time spent in doss houses when "I came to a realisation that everything was not as it could be". There was the deep impression made on him by a Hyde Park speaker who had spent seven years in the Soviet Union; and there was a girl who gave him the *Daily Worker* every day at his lodgings.

"Four or five of the lodgers used to meet most nights in the kitchen where discussion around every known subject always

took place," he wrote. "Between the girl and the *Worker* I became convinced that I should go to Spain."

The Spanish generals started their rising from Morocco. On the mainland the Republican government mastered the army garrisons in a few days. Workers, often armed only with stones and clubs, stormed the barracks against machine-guns.

But this was no civil war—it was the prelude to world war. Hitler and Mussolini needed control of Spain to command the sea approaches to Malta, Egypt and the Middle East. All through the summer of 1936 German and Italian planes and arms poured into Spain, and German warships protected the passage of Moorish troops and Foreign Legionaries from North Africa. The fraud of "Non-Intervention" followed. It was the shameful cover under which the fascist Powers armed General Franco and Right-wing governments in Britain and France disarmed the Spanish people. Quickly came the grim early days of November, 1936, when the Moors reached the suburbs of Madrid and the London newspapers announced that the Spanish capital had fallen.

They were counting without the people. Since August men and women of many nations who saw in this fight their own people's fight, had arrived in Spain. First came French workers and Polish miners working in France, then Italian and German anti-fascists, who knew the enemy at home.

In Britain, too, the peril was seen and warning given. Harry Pollitt, the general secretary of the Communist Party, declared: "A fascist victory in Spain will plunge the world into war, in which democratic France will be surrounded by fascist States and will be disrupted by a Hitler-controlled movement within France itself. It is an absolute illusion to think that Britain can 'keep out of it'."

The International Brigade was formed in October. Three hastily trained battalions—German, Polish and French—reached beleaguered Madrid on November 9th. Shortly after came the first 500 men from Britain.

Jack made three attempts to get in touch with the volunteers'

organisation in London. The third was successful and he went to Spain in February, 1937. "I remember most clearly", writes R. W. Robson, who was in charge of the interviewing, "his smile, frank and friendly, especially when he was accepted. Like all volunteers he was warned against illusions about what was involved. He just said: 'Tell me how to get there'."

He was there in time to take his brief, tragic part in the second great battle of the war—the fight at Jarama which checked the enemy drive to cut the Valencia road and take Madrid by encirclement.

On February 11th Franco troops, with German tank forces and artillery, forced the Jarama river and launched an offensive in three columns toward the road. They were held and stopped in three days of heavy fighting—the three grievous days on which the British battalion lost 400 of its original 600 men, in killed and wounded. Four days later the American-Canadian Lincoln Battalion, to which Jack, because of his Canadian birthplace, was posted, reached front-line reserve positions. On February 24th they moved into the trenches of the Bulgarians, the famed Dimitrov Battalion.

The pressure was desperate. Jack was probably among the 65 men, all going into the line without preliminary training, who were sent forward as reinforcements on the same day. Three days later the Brigade launched a counter-attack, with the Lincolns operating as a shock force. A Brigader who took part in the attack recalls this:

"About noon the order came to go over the top. The sun was hot. Group by group hopped the trenches charging the fascists who were only about 250 metres away.

"A few groups got over with scarcely any casualties. Machine-guns pitted the sand-bags all along the lines in a constant staccato. Bullets sprayed like the heavy pounding of a riveting machine. Cross-fire from many machine-guns made an impenetrable steel wall against advance.

"More groups and sections went over. Soon the calls for First Aid came, and then became insistent. Many got wounded just as they climbed the parapet to go over. Some from among the recent arrivals went over the top with full packs on their backs and charged . . ."

Answering a call for volunteers to bring in the wounded in this action Jack was shot through the spine as he stooped over a man on the ground. He crawled back to the trench under the murderous fire. A few hours in the front line—and his part as a soldier was ended.

For eight months he lay between life and death, as he underwent three major operations. Another Brigader wounded at Jarama, Ken White, recalls:

"I first met him in the La Pasionaria hospital in Murcia. If it could be called meeting. For several months we lay in adjoining wards but never set eyes on each other. We knew each other's names. Each knew when the other went through a particularly bad spell. We sent messages to each other. I knew by the sounds he was unable to suppress that he wouldn't make the trip from his ward to mine. I didn't need to see the faces of the nurses, the tears in their eyes when they came from the dreadful operation of turning him in the bed to give me his greeting.

"We waited, from day to day, week to week, month to month, to hear that he had finally escaped from the world of indescribable pain in which he dwelt. But he fought too hard to escape that way. He kept hoping when he knew all along there was little or no hope.

"We shook hands for the first time in late August. We were going home. No use pretending any longer that we'd be going back up the line again. He was a shock of hair and a pair of bright eyes looking at me out of the drawn, haggard face of an old man who was about 25.

"Then from his stretcher, that smile beamed out like a

torch and that 'Hullo there you old b. . . .' greeted me. We played cards, talked about our former lives and helplessly cursed the fascist swine all the way to Albacete."

Already the man's fighting spirit, which was to lead him into life-long battles against odds, was legendary. Another soldier at the hospital wrote: "The chap's cheerfulness always amazed me. You would think he had the world at his feet. I don't think I have seen the like in any way. And then of course about Spain, Spain was right and would come out on top."

In July, Harry Pollitt made his second visit to the Brigaders. He has written:

"I saw a Canadian comrade lying dangerously ill. He had been shot at the base of the spine and the lower part of his body had been paralysed. Now, with skilful treatment, life was coming back to his limbs. It was Jack Brent. I went to his bedside, but he was in such terrible agony that it was impossible for either of us to speak."

Here is part of a letter headed, "Comrade Jack Brent, Hospital Internationale, Murcia", written to his brother in Whithorn in May.

"Well Brother,

"Surprised at the new address I suppose. I have been fighting on the Jarama Front. The bullet entered my left hip and came out just below the ribs on the right side. I am now paralysed from the waist down. . . .

"Anyhow about my troubles I think I told you enough. I was in Albacete during an Air Raid and the next day we were digging out mangled heaps of human flesh, Jesus, that was enough to make the most sceptical Communists, as I am myself. At Valencia I saw a refugee train. It was packed to twice its capacity with old men, women and children. The sight of those

half-naked children, the women with their bundles, all they had left of their homes, will remain in my memory always."

He was not able to leave hospital until November. Late that month he hobbled off the train at Victoria, supporting himself on the two ash cudgels that were to be a familiar sight for a decade and more wherever people in Britain fought on against Franco after treachery and cowardice in high places had robbed the Spanish people of their freedom.

Jack joined the Communist Party in the following summer.

It was the summer in which the International Brigaders, as they withdrew from Spain in a final gesture against German and Italian intervention, took their historic pledge at a farewell parade in Barcelona:

> *We are returning to our respective countries, not for celebrations in our honour, not to rest, but to continue the fight. We are merely changing the fronts and our weapons.*

No man carried out the Brigaders' promise more faithfully than Jack Brent.

Chapter III

BATTLE FOR THE TUBES

I joined because of the examples of Communists I had seen in Spain, because through reading and discussion I came to realise that which I had not seen in the early days when I first heard of Socialism—the need for continual struggle, therefore organisation and discipline, if we are to win.

A NEW world, a world of ideas allied to action, captured the imagination of the wounded soldier in the two years that followed. Hundreds of letters to friends have recorded Jack's thrill of discovery as the jig-saw of the life he knew, the life of privation and the underdog, sorted itself into an ordered pattern in his mind.

He could not take a job. He was constantly under drugs. He lived with friends, between lengthy spells in hospital. He read insatiably, with a dictionary beside the book. After he first read the *Communist Manifesto*, nothing diminished the thirst with which he drank in the teachings of Socialism or checked the enthusiasm with which he spread them almost in the same breath.

He became literature secretary for his Party branch early in 1939. Many friends first met him as he stumped up and down the hilly roads of Hampstead, arching himself along on his sticks, his pockets filled with "ammunition". A friend with whom he stayed writes: "He was studying and reading a lot, at Marx House and so on. He was completely full of literature—when he met someone he always pulled out a pamphlet. And he had his own pitch at Belsize Park tube station—used to stand there for three hours at a time. He worked up the sales of the *Daily Worker* from 20 to about 120 a night."

The wife of a Brigader who helped care for Jack, Mrs. Sally Carson, has written of the "amazing correspondence course" she conducted with him about this time.

It was the result of a challenge which he had at once accepted. His grammar and spelling were bad, his ideas crudely expressed—so for months Sally returned his letters carefully corrected. "I learned from them", she writes, "of the long talks he had with fellow patients, with nurses and doctors, and of the *Daily Worker* sales he was building up in the hospital."

As strong as his passion to learn was this demand that others must share in his discoveries, must know about Spain, must act to prevent the war that was coming as the struggle in Spain neared its end. From hospital he wrote in early 1939: "Most of the guys here only know there is a war on, but it does not disturb them. They know nothing whatever about it, about the consequences. When I try to tell them, they say: 'Why talk about war, this is a hospital'.

"Maybe, it probably is my approach which is wrong. But what I do do is to get my reading matter around. At the moment—and I have just looked around the ward—I see four of the fellows engrossed in 'Red propaganda'."

Jack held his pitch and sold his papers right up to the banning of the *Daily Worker* in January, 1941. An engineer friend, Bill Holt, writes:

"Snow swirled across the streets. Jack was always at his post. He took up his place at seven o'clock and often went on until the last passenger had gone, and railway workers closing down for the night shouted goodnight as he turned to leave. I've known him come home three times to change his clothes."

The people knew him and loved him. Many a night the taxi men on the nearby rank slipped down the hill to give him a lift home after his turn was over. Friends recall seeing the policeman on duty at the station cover Jack with his cape as the freezing rain pelted.

Ex-Brigader Jim Ruskin has written the following account of his first meeting with Jack, whom he was to know well later in the work of the newly formed International Brigade Association.

"I walked through a narrow passage to a back bedroom. He was lying on the bed, reading a book. I remember his broad smile, direct and friendly manner of speaking, as if he had known me for a long, long time. It made me feel the same way towards him. After a few minutes talk, he got off the bed and hobbled out into the garden, where he squatted on the grass. The contrast between the sunlit garden and his drawn face, especially his deep, unusually quiet eyes, brought out his great inner suffering. I immediately thought 'this man is very ill, and must take great care of himself'. When I came next day, to my great surprise he was out—he had some Party work to do. There was no stopping him. In a fortnight or so he would again become bedridden."

The war that the Brigaders had striven to avert was rapidly approaching. In a letter to his brother in September, 1938, Jack discussed John's service with the Territorials, and delivered himself of one of those stormy political lectures at which none ever took offence. He wrote:

"So you were at Dreghorn camp for your fortnight. It is near Redford Barracks I seem to remember. We used to fire our machine-gun course on the range there, I think. I do not think it is wrong of you to be in the Territorials and for many reasons. One excellent reason is that should war break out then the more trained men the better.

"But we must ask ourself who and for what are we training to fight. Do you remember the £6,000,000 handed over to Germany by the Bank of International Settlement and handed over with the full consent and knowledge of the British Govt.?

And the scandal which has just come to light—the proposed loan of £100,000,000 to Germany by an international commission of bankers? . . . Don't you think it curious and suspicious that on the one hand we see our Govt. strengthening Germany whilst on the other hand they ask us to give our service and our lives if need be to fight Germany?

"Maybe you will see it as I see it, and I hope you will, that Chamberlain and his gang have very little intention of fighting Germany.

"What we want actually is Peace, that is why we must have a pact with Russia. Were we allied with France and the Soviet Union, Hitler would not dare to move. Unfortunately the British Govt. do not want an all-embracing Pact with the Soviet Union and for the very good reason that some day they hope that Germany will attack the Soviet Union. This however is a long subject, one on which it would be necessary to write hours were I to tell you all my views on it. I will suffice myself by saying that the cause of war is Profits, the system in which bread is baked not because people are hungry but to make profits, and houses are not built because you need shelter but because they can bring in fabulous rents. Ponder over these things, John, and you can then understand why it is today that the Soviet Union is the bulwark of Peace."

Through the last pre-war spring and summer, as the Communist Party and the *Daily Worker* fought on staunchly to win the defensive pact of Britain, France and the Soviet Union which alone could now prevent catastrophe, Jack Brent took his place among the foremost.

In March the betrayal of Munich was completed when German army units marched into Prague. In September, Hitler's armies invaded Poland. The evil conspiracy of Right-Wing governments in the West had gone awry, the "crusade against Communism" had fallen to pieces.

A year later came the Dunkirk evacuation and soon afterwards

fleets of Nazi warplanes were striking at Britain's cities; the bill run up by the Munich plotters had come home for the people to pay in blood and tears.

And in the autumn of 1940 London itself became one of the battlefields of world war. The tube stations where Jack and his friends had worked to the last to ward off the conflict were in the thick of it.

They became a battleground in more ways than one. The first action had to be fought out with Home Secretary Herbert Morrison, who gave orders that the people must not use the tube shelters to shelter from the bombs. But the Londoners had no confidence in the flimsy surface shelters they were told to use. Tens of thousands immediately ignored the orders. The deep stations of Hampstead, even more than most, offered safety. The people moved in.

Jack moved with them, a bundle of bedding on his back and a bundle of *Daily Workers* under his arm. He was one of the first to answer an appeal by the Communist Party for volunteers to help London's first war refugees.

He was at this time free from pain, thanks to an operation earlier in the year. The relief was to be short. He seized eagerly the new opportunities which it gave him.

Everything was needed—food, drink and elementary comforts and health measures—for the shelterers, and as the winter drew on their needs rapidly increased. The Government was bent on evicting them. Health and medical services, urgently required, were at first refused. When Jack led a deputation to the borough council to demand them, the council said: "Ask the stationmaster". The stationmaster said: "Go to the council, we are responsible for passengers, not for trespassers".

Jack cut this knot. With a volunteer doctor and nurse he established a first-aid post, London's first on the Underground. Then the council discovered that it was responsible after all and an official first-aid post soon appeared.

One of the group of three with whom Jack worked, Bill Holt, has described how the fight continued:

"Another deputation went off to see the railway officials. A canteen was needed, to provide hot drinks for the children and for workers coming down straight off shift. 'Sorry, no, you shouldn't be on the station at all', was the reply. When Jack went off to see them, they said the same. That was how the Cocoa battle began.

"'We must make our own cocoa,' Jack said. We made cocoa and supplied it to the children at a half-penny a cup. The word went round the families: bring cups.

"The canteen was in the station staff room. The stationmaster, who had no love for 'Crutchy', as he called him, expelled the cocoa-brewers—he wasn't having any of that nonsense! The same night a meeting was held in Jack's corner of the station. It decided to go to the cafes above ground for help. One proprietor gave it, and Sylvia Lovett and Mavis Turner made the drink in his kitchen and carried it down to the children for weeks after that.

"Jack was the treasurer. He went up and down the platform collecting donations for the cocoa fund. Soon we were able to give a free issue once a week. Cocoa had come to stay.

"Next thing that happened was we had an offer from the station officials: stop your cocoa—and we will open a canteen. We had another meeting. We told them 'Nothing doing. Set up your canteen first'. We explained to people that if we stopped, they might have to wait a long time before the canteen arrived. Eventually the canteen opened—and sold cocoa at 2*d.* a cup.

"By this time the station officials were really on the warpath. First an official came along to our section, which was by the lift shafts, and told us it was considered unsafe. He said alternative accommodation in street shelters had been 'reserved' for

the fifty or so people in our section. The idea was obvious—clear the Communists out.

"Our group met and Jack said: 'If they get us out, they'll restrict other areas and clear the people out bit by bit. We must call a station meeting and explain that this is a threat to all.'

"Before the meeting a delegation went to see the 'alternative accommodation'. What a sensation there was when it came back to report that one of the shelters was already a mass of rubble—hit by blast from a near miss.

"The next night the police arrived to try to clear the section but they soon retreated, amid a chorus of home-truths in good cockney. Soon after this another peculiar meeting was held on the station platform. This time it was the district supervisor being heckled. He had arrived in bowler hat and pin-stripe trousers to tell the people that the 'no queues' system started by our group was illegal.

"We had been visiting the sections, taking names and place reservations and arranging station marshals to watch over things. It was necessary, because with mid-winter near people were catching colds, rheumatism and pneumonia in the queues above ground. But the stationmaster didn't welcome it and called in the supervisor. In the end he had to agree—on condition the station appointed the marshals. They didn't want any Communists. But he never came near our section, which was the only one that elected its own marshal. She was a young working-class house-wife and did a fine job."

The great move-in could not be stopped. Before the winter was out, shelter conditions of the kind Jack and his comrades demanded and fought for had to be granted all along the Underground lines of the capital.

The struggle tested the stamina of the fittest. Long nights of watchfulness, of caring for the people's needs, of organising and agitation, followed long days in the war factories. Jack's spirit

never flagged. But the strain told heavily on his strength and in the middle of that first grim winter of war he had to give the job up.

He already had another. He had been carrying it on all through the battle for the tubes. Often he would go straight from the platform corner where he had spent the night, take a train to the centre of the city and start the day early in the attic office where the International Brigade Association had set up its headquarters.

"I remember most vividly", a woman worker in the office recalls, "how he used to struggle up five flights of stairs, two or three times a day, with perspiration streaming down his face—and always a smile. Sometimes his legs used to give way. Then after about five minutes he got up. It was terrifying."

The Association had been formed on March 5th, 1939, on the day that a military putsch in Madrid brought the Spanish tragedy to its close. Its aims were these:

"To carry on in Britain the spirit and tradition of the International Brigade as front-line fighters for the defence and advance of democracy against fascism, for the rapid development of common action and purpose among all anti-fascist people; to spread the truth about the struggle of the people, army and Government of Republican Spain and to win all necessary aid for the Spanish Republic.

"By this and other activities, to honour the immortal memory of those who fell in Spain . . .

"We were all changed people, changed by what had happened to us in Spain. And we knew that we could not go on as if the Spanish struggle had not happened, that we had brought that struggle home to England with us, and we could not lay it aside."

Late in 1940 Jack took temporary charge of the I.B. office.

Early in the following year he was elected London secretary, and in August national secretary of the organisation. He held the post until July, 1943—for two years filled with activities that form one of the most dramatic political campaigns of the entire war and will always be linked with Jack Brent's name.

In the middle of this struggle he went home for a fortnight's holiday. This was the scene in the kitchen at Whithorn, as his brother John recalls it, when Jack keeked his head round the door and hobbled in:

"I mind how the old woman was sitting there, and he came in on his crutches and put his arm round her and they were both greetin' and she said: 'Ah kent fine ye'd come tae see me, ma wee boy' and 'I'm pleased to see ye' and 'I'll no see ye again' . . .

"It was her opinion, ye see, that folk shouldna be fighting at all—she had just about broke her heart with him going into the army. She just thought it was terrible to have to rear a wean up to gang through what he had went through.

"The last part he was alone with her. They went to the pictures together and it was awful frosty and he often fell. One night they'd all been at the pub, Bobbie Murray, Bill Jolly, Jeanie and Angus, and Geordie brought down two bottles of stout for the old woman and said: 'There ye are, old girl, drink my health when I'm away.'"

He was to be away, fighting battles, for the rest of his life.

Chapter IV

SPARKS OF LIBERTY

IT was no mere work of commemoration that faced the Brigaders. During the next three years as Nazism engulfed Europe and the war neared its crisis, the International Brigade Association was confronted with responsibilities of the first order in the slow-gathering mobilisation of the peoples to deal fascism its death blow. Its members were quickly spread all over the world. Brigaders on a dozen battlefields, from the Pacific to the Western Desert, from Sicily to Burma, were fulfilling the Barcelona pledge.

They contributed their Spanish experience to Allied battle schools. They stiffened the fighting spirit of the anti-Hitler forces. They carried to every section of the far-flung struggle the sparks from that great fire of the human spirit born in the bloody fighting in the olive groves and hills of Spain. And there were few left at home or in civilian life to do the many jobs that faced the Brigaders' headquarters.

It was Jack who filled the gap. He carried on, at times almost single-handed, a continual struggle on behalf of the Spanish people—those in Spain and those exiled in Britain—and he played a general's part in the great campaign to save the lives of former International Brigaders imprisoned in the concentration camps of Vichy France, North Africa and Italy.

In the fearful spring and summer of 1942, as Nazi armies crossed the Don, pushed on toward the Volga and Stalingrad, threatening Moscow and the Caucasus, the peril hanging over the prisoners deepened.

In the West the Allied armies held back; the influence of politicians who dreaded the results of a peoples' victory was strong—the promised Second Front in Europe was still far off. The outcome of the war, the future of humanity, were in the balance.

For two years the Association had striven to obtain the release of thousands of Brigaders who had been interned in French, Spanish and North African camps after the end of the Spanish war. Spaniards, Germans, Italians, Danes, Poles, Norwegians and men of a dozen other nationalities, they were in double danger—from starvation and disease in the appalling camp conditions, and later from the Gestapo and the Italian police.

The Mexican Government had offered asylum to all internees for whom release and transport could be arranged. It was necessary first to obtain exit permits and the government at Vichy, ruling part of France under Nazi licence, gave these only under great pressure. To stir the Allied governments in London to any action on behalf of their imprisoned nationals was scarcely less difficult. This was the challenge that the Brigaders' new secretary accepted.

It was a stiff political and diplomatic task, for which Jack lacked both preparation and experience. The resource and boundless energy with which he tackled it amazed most those friends who knew the full extent of his injuries. They recall this period as the one in which his personality grew most rapidly, from the hesitant early weeks when he would be shy and awkward if he had to meet a Member of Parliament, to the later stages of the campaign when he marshalled M.P.s by the dozen and the score in support of the Brigaders' cause.

The only great Power still in diplomatic relation with Vichy in the autumn of 1941 was the United States. Messages, appeals and money for the prisoners had to go mainly through American official channels. In November Jack led a deputation to the American Embassy to transmit an appeal to President Roosevelt.

It made three requests. They were: exit permits for Luigi Longo ("Gallo"), inspector general of the International Brigades, and for Franz Dahlem, former Reichstag deputy and leading member of the Thaelmann battalion; help in sending money to the camps through the American Red Cross; and American

help in consultation with Latin-American governments in getting out the other Brigaders.

Another member of the deputation, Major Len Crome, Jack's great friend and his tireless "war correspondent" when he later went overseas, writes about this meeting:

"Ambassador Winant was extremely pleasant. He sat down on the carpet with us and gave us cigarettes. He said how sympathetic he was with our aims and discussed in a very business-like fashion what was to be done. He made several suggestions and undertook several things himself, which he did. He phoned the State Department in Washington and phoned Jack to say he had done so. Jack did all the talking and Winant was very impressed."

The visit was one of many hundreds of "Embassy calls" which Jack made an established part of his office routine—if the word can be used of the inspired informality with which he worked. All through 1941 and the following year, he would get on the phone, or if he was well enough go by bus, for a regular monthly check-up on his "cases"—the men for whose release the Association was working.

About 150 of the Brigaders were still in Franco jails. Late in 1941 the Spanish Government said they were free to leave if any government would claim them. The list was added to the other names that Jack pushed before the generally unwilling attention of the highly placed London exiles.

November, 1942, brought the Allied landings in North Africa, the quick collapse of Vichy rule there, and hopes of speedy release for hundreds of men who were rotting in camps or dying a slow death in Sahara road gangs. The hopes were disappointed. The American anti-Communist war policy of later years was already casting its sinister shadow over the struggle to end fascism. Darlan, precursor of the Syngman Rhees and Chiang Kai-sheks of the post-war period, was installed in power and

continued the old fascist policies under American protection. Long and bitter was the fight to win freedom for the North African prisoners, and to obtain for them the right to serve in the Allied armies. Of this third round in the campaign and Jack's part in it, a staff worker at the I.B.A. recalls:

"The French troops who liberated Djelfa and other camps regarded the people in them as no better than criminals. They left them under the officers who had been in charge under the Germans. Jack was tramping the pavements of Downing Street and going to the offices of the other governments and without any languages at all he was getting support—except from the Poles—because their nationals were involved. The Dutch helped. De Gaulle was not much good. There was no trouble with the Czechs. The Belgians were very helpful and the Norwegians were good—they had a pride of country."

The men in North Africa were not all released until months later, when one of Jack's letters from hospital records the pleasure the news brought him. It was the campaign he had led which largely discredited the whole policy that kept anti-fascists behind barbed wire and intrigued with the enemy.

The Allied landings were followed by the German occupation of Vichy France. Over 150 Brigaders had been released in the previous year but hundreds still remained in the French camps. They fell into the hands of the Gestapo. Longo, who is today assistant general secretary of the Italian Communist Party, was handed over to Mussolini's police.

This was the crisis in which the Association won its most celebrated single success. By a swift and sure public agitation in which 275 leading figures in British life sent appeals to the Pope, Longo's life was saved. Bishops, M.P.s and leaders of most of the trade unions were drawn in. Jim Ruskin writes:

"I shall never forget how Jack organised this campaign. When we received news that Longo's life was in danger, he at once

got hold of Miss Eleanor Rathbone M.P. on the telephone—he always preferred the personal touch. He explained the case and the words he ended with were, I think, 'Well, honey'—I have never heard Miss Rathbone called 'honey' by anyone—'this is an urgent matter and I hope you will collect many signatures in the House this very afternoon. I am asking Lord Wedgwood to do the same in the House of Lords. Let us see which of you can do better.'

"Then he approached Lord Wedgwood, who said he would be happy to take part in Socialist emulation. By the next day Jack had over 40 signatures of M.P.s, Lords, Catholic dignitaries and Anglican bishops to a telegram to the Pope. That was his style of work. His requests were always made with such confidence that it was almost impossible to refuse him. It was just as difficult—it was impossible, I should say—to refuse a donation for the International Brigade Association when Jack asked for it."

These successes in high places reflected the country-wide support, understanding and admiration for the Brigaders' anti-fascist pioneer work and record which the great campaigns conducted by the Association in 1941 and 1942 had aroused.

In February, 1943, one of the Brigaders' famous war-time shows was staged in the Scala Theatre, London—it was the last for which Jack was responsible as secretary. It depicted in thirteen scenes the Brigaders' exploits—at Alamein, on Allied convoys to Russia, in the European resistance movements and in the camps.

The show added over £1,000 to the fund from which many thousands of pounds were sent over these years, by means both regular and devious, for relief in the camps.

They were the years when the I.B.A. headquarters grew under the buoyant sway of Jack's personality and the work it had to accomplish into the extraordinary anti-fascist soldiers' club which is the liveliest memory of so many of Jack's friends.

Brigaders who had come half round the world in little ships,

one friend recalls, would turn up in London, look up the I.B. office and ask for Jack. Some who came knew only one address—"Jack Brent, London". They had heard it in French and North African camps. They already knew him as the great fighter in London working for their release.

Then there were the merchant seamen whom he picked up in East End cafes, Jack's own couriers, who took money and messages to the camps, and often on his insistence left their own clothes for the imprisoned men.

A Canadian ex-Brigader who dropped in at the office while on leave in 1942 writes:

"A dingy office, a broad smile, an impression of purposeful activity reaching far beyond the walls of the office—such are my memories. Plenty was going on. What with Brigader comrades in the prison camps, others undergoing discrimination in the Allied forces, the campaign for the Second Front, it was a busy time. Jack seemed to be shouldering an enormous amount of responsibility as well as much routine work.

"A big meeting was taking place about which he had much to do. A Canadian was needed to fill out the panel of speakers. I recall how he seized on me, platform-shy as I was, and inspired me to make a rousing if brief call for a Second Front."

Through the efforts of the I.B.A. several ex-Brigaders were finally given commissions. In 1942 the question came up in the House of Commons. A British ex-Brigader, Paddy O'Daire, has this recollection:

"Eleanor Rathbone asked about people who had had commissions and experience in Spain. Someone—it must have been Mr. Churchill—said 'Do you know anyone?' She said she knew lots. She didn't of course, but she asked Jack.

"He wrote round and asked several Brigaders if they would accept commissions.

"How well he used to get on with everybody. I remember him ringing up Miss Rathbone and saying: 'Good-bye, honey' and she loved it!"

All his own was Jack's style—but it rarely failed to work. Here is another picture of these days, from an office colleague:

"We had Brigaders in the uniforms of all the national armies. Jack had a cupboard with things he had scrounged, tinned food, cigarettes and so on. We were always having people parked on us. We never knew who they were—just friends of Jack's. There were 60 Brigaders in the American army. They all came to the office and brought their friends. I think he was in bed a lot then and he used to have enormous bed-side circles—like the French king—and gave beer parties."

"There are Brigaders in every corner of the earth", writes Jim Ruskin, "who have a soft spot in their hearts for the work he did for them in their hour of greatest need."

How much was the work done, how broad the scale of the activities for which he was responsible was seen at the conference held by the Association in London on April 3rd, 1943, when the results achieved were summed up. Representatives of seventeen national organisations of Brigaders, delegates from nine leading British trade unions, and five Ministers of Allied governments attended the conference.

During the campaign, Jack recorded in his report to the meeting, over 30,000 letters had been sent to the most various organisations and by this appeal and through letters £7,448 were collected. He was able to report: "Altogether twenty-seven executive committees of trade unions supported us, as well as over 2,000 Labour, Communist, Liberal, Co-operative, religious, youth and trade union organisations."

The links with the Spanish people grew constantly stronger as

the Association held great meetings in London and other cities to keep without fail its main commemoration days: in February for the Jarama battle, July for the outbreak of the war against the Spanish Republic, November for the defence of Madrid.

These days, Jack used to say, commemorated the first time in history that men of so many nations united in one cause; the first example of fifty-two countries united in a struggle for freedom.

"He was a living diary of the Spanish war," writes Mme Isabelle Blume, the famous Belgian women's leader and peace champion. She remembers:

"On each anniversary I was certain to hear his step in the passage which led to my office in London. I did not meet him in Spain, though I had heard of this boy, so gentle, burning with an inner fire, who had come to defend Madrid.

"With his expression of the greatest charm he would convince you that it was necessary to speak again about Spain to our friends in Manchester, in Glasgow, in London. He wanted no one to forget, and each one of us to remind the government concerned, that there could not be peace in the world unless the legitimate Government and the Republic were re-established in Madrid.

"I always wondered where he found the energy to walk, to risk his life in the buses and the traffic of London. What is certain is that he never missed a rendezvous or an opportunity to add more work to what he was already doing.

"I did not see him after 1944. But often when I have been nearly discouraged or exhausted, I have thought of him and have taken up the work again, for other reasons, but also because not to do so would have seemed like letting him down.

"I never told him that. Why don't we find the time, among all our activities, to pause and tell such people what we think of them and what they bring to us?"

Chapter V

GOOD TO BE ALIVE

THE soldier's respite was over. In July, 1943—back to hospital. The daily more critical state of health which he had shrugged off during the ceaseless campaigning could be ignored no longer. From this month, his life was to be more in hospitals than out of them.

First came ten months in the Baguley Military Hospital at Altrincham in Cheshire, where he was under the care of the celebrated Dr. Gabarro, refugee from Franco, brilliant plastic surgeon, Jack's friend and fellow-fighter.

He underwent twenty skin-grafting operations to heal the source of an infection which was imperilling his life. For much of the time he was strapped face downward in bed. And month after month healing would not come.

To many it seemed at times that the indomitable fighter's combat days were finished, that pain and wounds would have the best of the struggle, that a lingering bed-ridden existence was Jack's certain future. They were wrong—as they were to be wrong often again.

The story of these days, of Jack's ceaseless battle for activity that hospital life could never imprison, is best told in letters he wrote to Major Crome, who was now on service in North Africa and Italy, and to Crome's wife Helen, who was living in evacuation billets at Assington in Suffolk.

They are letters richly filled with the very man—with his utter involvement in the tremendous events of the war, his towering enthusiasms, for a new idea, a new book, or some plan of action, his yearning for Spain and its people's liberation, his longing for victory in the war and for the lasting peace that must follow.

Through them breathes the spirit of friendship and a tender humour, as he writes of his successes and failures among the men

in the ward, most of whom were wounded soldiers who had been brought straight from North Africa, Sicily and Italy.

The correspondence shows the wide range of his interests as well as the often piercing insight into the events of the day, which he followed passionately and seemed actually to take part in.

He wages friendly little campaigns: Helen must send him eggs, as he is "suffering from a chronic disease called starvation". Helen must buy for her husband the book *Germany's Master Plan*, just published, as it is the very best thing ever written on the economics of Munich. And he keeps on, in letter after letter, until his point is gained.

And uppermost always, the victories in the war, the great Soviet offensives, the brilliant prospects held out by the Teheran meeting of Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt, together with an enormous zest for living and eagerness to get back to the I.B.A. office, back into the struggle.

Here are passages from the letters arranged in date order. They form one of several sustained commentaries of this kind sent by Jack to friends all over the country.

(To Helen)

September, 1943

"You know I feel pretty good here. It's the first time in a long while that I have been among non-politicals. At the moment I'm feeling my way around and kinda establishing myself. Although I shan't be in this hospital long, I hope to leave a mark. A mark in the form of a group which will carry on the good work.

"The people are very friendly to me here, especially the doctors. They are friendly because of Spain. It is sure quite a change since last I was in hospital. Then most every one was against me. Then the Soviet Union was the brutal aggressor which was raping poor little Finland. Yes, the transformation is tremendous. It is so much easier to talk with the fellows.

"I started writing this at exactly six o'clock. Not six o'clock

in the evening but six o'clock in the morning. You know we get up in the middle of the night (5.30 a.m.) and go to bed in the early evening (8.30 p.m.).

"I had made up my mind not to write you until I got them there eggs. But then I thought, eggs, they might be Chinese eggs, that is the kind they bury in the ground for years, I believe ten years. So I further thought, now if they're Chinese eggs she's going to send me, and it might well be, for it's so long, maybe they need another year or two laying in the earth; if I don't write her she won't write me and, who knows, anything may happen.

"And a lot has happened to me since I wrote you. First I had an operation, at least that's what they called it. I lay there on the table quite conscious that is as conscious as I ever am. They cut away at the dead tissues whilst I drank tea and at the request of the doctor told them about the political set-up. What I did not like was that for eight days I had to lay on my belly with occasional rests on my side."

(To Crome)

October 23, 1943

"Dear Doc,

"Despite my present position in the universe, that is lying on my belly, I am starting to write this. When will I finish it? tomorrow maybe. The only thing I find more difficult to do than write is to shave.

"Have you ever had a prolonged belly-lying? You haven't. So you can't sympathise with me, can you? Do you know how many letters I've written since I've been here and I've been here in Manchester for 5 weeks? Over 150. Almost a full-time job. Have been writing solidly since a quarter to seven this morning. It's now twenty minutes to six. Was the same yesterday and the day before. Why not have written you first? Wanted to clear the decks first, you know, get all tidy first, a habit of mine. Must always dust my desk before getting to work.

"Since I've been in here I've had three operations. Actually I

feel that I'm kinda exaggerating to call them operations but that's what the medical folks here call them. The first was unsuccessful but did not matter much, second 33⅓% successful, i.e. 8 of the 25 little bits of skin which were grafted onto the wound 'took'. The third, it was done on Wednesday, was going fine, but, alas, a calamity. Last night in my sleep I turned over on my back and made a hellish mess of the wound. And I turned over despite the fact that my hands are tied to the side of the bed to prevent such a happening.

"Big disappointment. But when the mess was cleaned up it was not really so bad as it looked. Gabarro, the doctor, is quite pleased with progress which altho slow is nevertheless progress.

"In my last letter I told you about Helen not writing (because she finds it difficult). Now within the past week I've had three letters and a parcel of eggs. We sure got her rattled, eh, three letters in one week."

In the autumn of 1943 came reports of big Soviet successes in the Ukraine and the letters become a song for victory, in which Jack's thoughts for Spain and his hope for quick recovery mingle with his happiness at the news. On October 25th he writes to Crome:

"Tremendous, Melitopol ours, six miles from Krivoi Rog, the conditions exist for the biggest encircling movement in military history. Must greatly influence present Three Power conference. What will be the result? Am waiting anxiously. Demand for action is tremendous, not only here but throughout the world. Yes, am waiting anxiously.

"What's happening in the office? Main task—limbs for boys in North Africa. There are now about 150 mutilated. Last Thursday very successful Reunion of American Brigaders in this country was held under the auspices of the American Red Cross. You don't believe it? But it's true. There were a couple of dozen present, most of them came in answer to an advert in

Stars and Stripes. Yes sir, that's true too. Wonders will never cease: we've been asked by the Foreign Office what suggestions we have to make to get help to those in the concentration camps in France. It's a fact and you can't deny a fact . . ."

Four days later he writes to Helen about the meaning of the Soviet victories for the people of Britain, in a fervour of hope for action in the West, for joint blows to finish the enemy.

"I feel very excited. The Red Army's tremendous victories, what do they mean? They mean that millions of people, Soviet, European and also English will live who would otherwise have been killed. They live because the Red Army is strong, the Red Army is strong because of the unheard-of sacrifices of the whole Soviet people. And they live because Communists lead the Red Army, the Soviet People. Fascism would have been but a dream had we been leading the British People.

"The smashing of the Germans' defensive line on the Dnieper will have repercussions throughout the world and especially must it have affected the Three Power Conference just concluded in Moscow. Am waiting anxiously for the published statements. Are we to go forward into action? Are we to wait, wait, wait? Perhaps it will answer those questions.

"I'm well, still laying here and am thinking I'll still be here Xmas time. Sure I'd like some more lemons.

A day or two later he wrote to Crome:

"One listens to BBC news reports, one reads papers eagerly as a thirsty man gulps down water. Decades are telescoped into days. One becomes impatient to be up and at it.

"News from the office: C.O. of unit in which our friends released from North Africa are now serving has written agreeing to give facilities to distribute money to the boys. Money being sent. Cigarettes and books sent to all boys in Army. Much good classic literature sent to boys in Africa.

"Very busy sending out new appeal. Response excellent. Aim £5,000 for limbs for Fouka Marine mutilated."

In the same letter he writes:

"I'm in the midst of studying a tremendous book. Have read it once, but am now studying it carefully. It is an important book. So few important books are published. This is one all of us must read, *Germany's Master Plan*, written by two American Government Officials in a private capacity.

"What is it about? about Cartels, Trusts, Monopolies. They have spent many years officially investigating the works of same. The book is an exposure, very revealing and instructive exposure. Most of us are familiar with the political happenings since 1931. Various people put various interpretations on them. But none knew the economic background. Sure we guessed at it. Sure we knew about the proposed thousand million pound loan to Germany. But these were guesses and isolated incidents. Right here in this book we have a comprehensive and even detailed background of the Economics of Munich and what led up to it...

"These are just my hazy views or thoughts which don't tell you much. Alright, alright you've asked for it. Here's some facts from the book itself. [Quotes lengthy passages.] Have I excited your interest? Yes. Well, I'm writing to Helen suggesting she sends it to you. Would make a marvellous Xmas gift.

"I'm fine, wound heals marvellously, am hoping to be out of here by Xmas. Am doing lots of reading, essential reading, needed very much, was thirsting for it. Much, so much happens these days that it is absolutely essential to have a good grounding if we are to see events in correct perspective. Even if one does not see things with absolute clarity, they are yet exciting."

In November, 1943, the men in the ward read about the release from internment of Sir Oswald Mosley, leader of the fascists in Britain. Anger ran high all over the country and nowhere more

so than among the men wounded in the war. Jack wrote on November 27th:

"Dear Doc,

"I write you in the midst of the Mosley affair. It is tremendous, even here in a hospital I feel the strength, the excitement and more important the complete confidence of the people. Yes, we feel sure we will see Mosley back in jail.

"It must have been obvious that Mosley's release would cause a storm, indications of which they could have gauged by a premature announcement which could have been withdrawn if feeling ran too high. Instead, we see it carried out without consideration of what results might happen and we know that generally the feeling of the people is taken into consideration even if only to find out best method to pursue.

"Within the next ten days I hope the wound will be completely healed, amazing eh? Must tell you in detail the treatment since you're a doctor and because it may be useful. When I first came here I had Saline Baths once daily and Eusol Dressings. This for ten days. Then all dead flesh, both around edges and on surface was cut away. After this 'Gabarro Grafts' were put on. Gabarro Grafts are small squares of skin about a quarter of an inch square and are just placed on. This was done four times and altho they failed to 'take' it appears that they stimulated growth and cleaned the wound up. But this is probably no help to you at all, probably you know it all.

"Just remembered, nearly forgot, must tell you. After the House had risen, after Morrison had given his reasons for releasing Mosley, an angry disgusted M.P. showed one of Morrison's supporters the letter from the 8th Army boys strongly protesting against release. This supporter of Herbie, blandly and naïvely replied, 'Yes, but you know, those people of the 8th Army are so violently anti-fascist . . .'

"Salud y Victoria
"Jack B"

(To Helen)

December 1, 1943

"Am sorry you could not get the book. Now you had better leave it to me. I'll try & get it. Whenever Lornja gets it he will enjoy it, of that I'm sure.

"Won't be back in London for Xmas. Why, is your wound not getting better? Yes, it is, but even if it heals up before Xmas I shall stay here until after the festivities. Why? Well, there's a general feeling, and I'd like to, and there will only be a few days in it anyhow and I'll be able to round off my work, it's correct tactics, and the sister has seen the matron and she agrees that I can stay, and so I will and so there you are.

"Am very very glad to hear about your speaking. You must tell me how you went over and remember if you speak better now you didn't always speak so well and this applies also to your writing, you can improve, you are improving.

"We are busy here on Mosley Release also. Some of the 8th Army boys here have written to Morrison. Today they are writing to the Press. Petitions are also going round.

"Even here life has spice in it."

(To Crome)

December 12, 1943

"Have been reading some essays by Havelock Ellis and one was on the 'Origins of War'. What impressed me most was the tortuously wordy way he reached an approximately correct answer—and he is considered a great man too. We know that war could only happen when man could produce a surplus, because until such a stage is reached man's whole effort is devoted to procuring the necessities of life. Had warfare existed during this period he would have perished because it would have interfered with getting those necessities of life.

"Of course it is only in hospital that one has really time to think or, as it is sometimes mystically called, meditate, about

such things. One of my favourite pastimes is trying to find the correct answer to awkward questions. For example, I have never been able to answer correctly or satisfactorily the retort one gets—'But if you don't believe in God, what do you believe in, what is the purpose of life?' One comes up against it hundreds of times. So I ask myself: What is the purpose of life?

"But why only life, what is the purpose of anything? Is the purpose of food to feed or cloth to clothe? Sure it is. Simple, too. In fact it would seem that the purpose of anything is what it does, so it follows that the purpose of life is to live.

"But for life to live it must maintain itself, that is feed itself, it must reproduce itself and in the course of this we know that change and development takes place. We also know that Man is the highest form of life because it is the most conscious form of life. Therefore the highest purpose of life is to become more conscious. What do I mean? I'll show you and I'll show you how to become more conscious, thank you. Today man can control nature, can predict, but himself and his relations with other men still prevent him from making full use of all he has achieved. Millions starve in face of plenty, wars in which millions more are exterminated occur despite man, numberless babies die at birth, etc. etc. It is in the overcoming of these obstacles to progress that man becomes fully conscious, fully free, fully human, nor is it surprising that such a purpose should inspire those conscious of it . . . There, Doc, you have my philosophical meanderings but it explains much, clears up much for me.

"You know, or have you never noticed, that philosophy, and psychology too, I can read with greater interest than most other things.

"I have other occupations as well. There are a couple of kids about 15 years old, both have been in here a couple of years, that is, in an environment similar to a barrack room, so they are a couple of old-fashioned men, but they have the keenness of youth,

and one, Dicky, is very intelligent. We've just finished an hour on algebra, then an hour's break, then Radio and Electrical Engineering for an hour, both are interested in this. They want to tie up their fate with mine. I was pleased the last day when Dicky stumblingly confessed to me that he had a new ambition. 'What is it, Dicky,' I asked. 'I want to be like you.' Sure I was pleased. Who wouldn't?

"Heard from Helen, yesterday. Had thought that since I had not heard from her before that she had sent *Germany's Master Plan*, but no, she couldn't get it, it's out of print. But I'll get it somewhere, sometime, and you'll get it and you'll enjoy it as much as I did.

"And to the last I have left the important because it requires no comment. The meeting of Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin is the greatest victory since 1917. Reading the newspapers today makes one's blood run joyously through every part of one's body. The logic of events. What is the logic of events? Progress increasing progress. Ours is the victory, Lornja."

One of the letters Jack received from his soldier correspondents abroad brought great news to him in February. He wrote to Crome:

"I had a letter from a fellow now in Italy and he tells me that he has heard that Gallo was released by the Americans. If this is true, and it probably is, it is marvellous news.

"Am in high spirits. Yesterday when the Doc looked at me he said everything was fine and that there was now no danger of a breakdown or a setback which was always a distinct possibility. So perhaps if things keep on going well I shall have the last operation next week and after that it won't be long. After that I shall have a clearer perspective of freedom.

"Am in high spirits also because some good boys have just arrived here in recent days, boys from the 8th Army, wounded in Italy. And in the talks I've already had with them it is obvious

that good influences have been at work on them. Now it is up to me to fulfil, to complete, this work and I feel confident of doing this.

"Our forces, our strength, increase daily. The Red Army's continual and brilliant victories give us new strength and new power. By the time you get this Finland will probably be out of the war. In such an event the speed of developments will be enormously increased. There are already rumours of Hungary, Bulgaria and Rumania seeking peace terms.

"Had a letter from Helen last night. She won't be coming to see me, since the time she would be allowed in is so short. It would not be worth it. I would have liked to see her and I would like to see you too, Doc, and it may not be so very long . . ."

February 17, 1944

"Dear Doc,

"I've made a resolution; made it when I got your letter asking me why I had not written you. I'm resolved to write you at least once a week come what may and oftener if and when the possibility arises. At the moment there are so many other letters to write. There is another thing which I would kick myself for and that is the book *Germany's Master Plan* which I've given to someone to post off to you. It is my own copy, is marked, intended keeping it, had lent it out, should have sent it you a long time ago.

"Having confessed all my sins and omissions, at least all I'm going to confess, I want to tell you about the Jarama events. From my information I would say that they are probably the most successful held by our Association. The Reunion, Nan's description of it, fair warmed my heart. It was in the Hogar, informal, friendly, lots of talking, not speeches, lots of international community singing. I like that, and of course the reunion, the inevitable reunion in the pub in Bayswater Rd. You know the place, yes? The meeting in the Coliseum was a tremendous success, filled completely, over £450 collected, Harry making

one of the finest speeches ever. The main theme of the meeting and of the mass declamation was: 'It's all the same war, all the same war'. The part the Brigaders are playing was brought out well.

"Remember our heated and sometimes wordy discussions on Spain? The position seems to be that the Franco section are indissolubly tied up with Germany. Yet it is in Germany's interest for Spain to remain neutral. But there is a growing section very powerful, becoming dangerously powerful for Franco, who sees the futility of remaining in the Axis camp and would that Spain comes out on the side of the Allies. Such forces are represented by Gil Robles with backing of Juan March.

"And it seems that British and American policy whilst viewing such forces with favour and probably supporting them is yet trying desperately to wean Franco away from Hitler, to date with little effect. Resulting in this duality of policy is a lack of resoluteness for either. What then may be the outcome? We have seen the tactics of reaction, unsteady yet remaining in the saddle, and even though these tactics will fail eventually they have always met with initial success. The Darlan, the Badoglio tactics. That is what I think may happen in Spain but I feel even more confident that they will succeed even less effectively in Spain than in North Africa. When we go back to Spain my happiness will be to the full, to the brimming full.

"One feels that much will happen soon too. Some of the indications are (1) The tremendous pounding being given to the French invasion coast by the boys of the R.A.F. (2) Roosevelt's last speech to Congress which was a challenge to American reaction and a speech foreshadowing action, probably his most forceful yet. (3) The lack of any critical articles in the Soviet press—and the Russians never seemed to be bothered with backwardness at saying what they want or what they expect. (4) and lastly, and it is just an indication, the BBC Home and Forces programme comes off and we get a General News Service which has more of a fighting spirit about it, hope it doesn't change.

Underlying these factors is the growing strength of the progressive forces, as seen in the Russian Red Army's glorious offensives, the growing partisan and sabotage movement in Europe, the forthcoming International Trade Union meeting in London this year. Greater offensives and harder fighting has yet to come before Fascism is smashed. But ours is the Victory.

"I'm alright, Lornja, and cheerful, and am much more cheerful, in fact I'm happy that I've written this, a load has been lifted from my mind. Yes it has done me good to write, Fellah. And so I leave you and I lie here letting 'nature take its course'. It takes it all too slowly."

February 22, 1944

"Dear Doc,

"I intend to regain the honour of being your most regular correspondent. Tonight I want to tell you about Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or rather how it has affected me. You know how, as with a thirst, I was reading all the classics I got hold of and I got hold of many. Until now the one which I got most pleasure out of was Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*. It gave me immense pleasure, must read it again. But now, Lornja, I think *War and Peace* the finest book, the most amazing book I have ever read. You have read it, I take that for granted. You must have read it. It grows on me, Lornja. All those unfamiliar people have become familiar, I've grown to like some of them, some very much, others not at all. I feel I could love Natasha, I'm sure I could get along well with Pierre, the whole book grows on me.

"Just like life, a new place is unfamiliar, or confusing, you would get away from it if you could, you would go back to where you belong, to where you are known, to where you know. When I first came to London it's just how I felt, and had I been able to I should definitely have left it; and now I feel sure, no matter where I go I shall always come back to London even if only for a holiday.

"About the book. I almost live it, probably that is the highest achievement of art, the universalness which makes classics classic and great men great. And the feeling of time, of time passing is really conveyed. You leave Pierre journeying from Moscow to Leningrad (Petrograd) to get away from his wife and then you see what is happening in young Rostov's regiment. When you come back to Pierre you know that he arrived in Petrograd, has spent some time there and has been able to do the things you read . . . I've been wanting to pour out my reactions to someone and somehow felt you were the one. Did make attempt in one or two other letters but somehow got stuck at 'am reading *War and Peace*, a great book, you ought to, you must read it' and more I could not just get out.

"It is nearing the moment when night suddenly envelops us, the moment when lights are switched out and tho it is only nine-thirty one is supposed to be able to sleep, yet so few of us can, and sometimes we sing until a thin shrill woman's voice basely filled with sufficient authority commands—sometimes commends —us to silence, and we are silent. And sometimes it is dirty, dirty stories and one laughs or one would become cynical. One does sleep eventually and morning comes. It comes with as sudden speed as night comes. In a minute fraction of a second what was a still deathly silence becomes light everywhere and noise everywhere, nurses emit the noises, with the help of a rattling. . . .

"It is now morning. Am washed, not shaved, do that in the afternoon when I feel more like it. But the day is a succession of monotonous regular little things. Little is the word.

"Mosley affair, died down, has become a part of the general, the whole, is no longer the particular, a thing in itself. Yet it smoulders and the heat generated by the original blaze is still felt. It can easily flare up again, a waft of wind and it may blaze more furiously.

"A new Government White Paper has appeared on a National Health Service which will guarantee doctor, specialist, health centre and hospital treatment and medicines free to every man,

woman and child. A white paper must not become blackened in the long drawn out process of becoming law. Will write you again before the end of the week."

(To Helen)

Red Army Day, 1944

"Last night I got your letter and I felt good and would have written you straight away but was right in the middle of an absorbing game of chess. But I still feel good so am writing you first thing this morning.

"When will I be getting out of here? In about another couple of months probably if all goes well. All goes well at the moment, well but slowly, maybe in another fortnight's time I will have the final operation.

"I only found out last Saturday that the last dozen eggs I got came from Assington. And, by way of fishing, did you know that tomorrow, February the 24th, is the 32nd anniversary of my appearance on the face of the earth and what are you going to do about it?"

Helen's visit to Jack, put off many times, had finally been arranged.

March 8, 1944

"It will be lovely to see you, Helen. Am hoping that when April comes I shan't be much longer here. Am going up for an operation on Saturday. Only a small one tho'. It's in preparation for the final operation next week. Dimly I'm beginning to see Freedom's beginnings, to see the day when I get out of here. My guess is that I shall leave in about another five weeks.

"The new Red Army offensive is tremendous and I feel sure that the 2nd Front cannot be far off, cannot be long delayed.

"Am feeling good. Some good 8th Army boys here. Hope to join at least three of them into the Party and that of course makes me feel good.

"Dinner (lunch) is just coming, fish—been on bloody fish for

over a month now, so if I look funny when next you see me you'll know the reason why. But to dinner. It sure will be lovely to see you."

A week later the longed-for visit took place and in several letters he talks to Crome about it, with increasing animation as his wound appears to be on the mend and freedom draws near, and he tells Crome, "I'll make up for all this bed-lying when I do get up, make no mistake about that, boy."

March 14, 1944

"Dear Doc,

"I have much to tell you, so much that I have listed everything in case I forget anything. Helen has just left me, just five minutes ago, and am excited, she is the first real friend whom I have seen for nearly six months. Sure lots of people come to see me, sometimes too many, but well Helen's different. And we talked and talked, about you, yes much about you, boy would I have been happy if you had been here, but you were very near both of us and several times when we had exhausted a line of conversation we had you to fall back on. That, my friend, is true immortality.

"Lornja, popularity has its price. I started writing this at about 4.30 and now it is 8.30. But I have been doing much talking. My bedside at times becomes a discussion circle, and then I'm one of the old timers in the ward which also has its price. Most of the fellows keep coming back here on weekly visits and the old timers, the friendly faces, are the ones they make for; and some days, especially on a Monday, it is like the office when so many came in that work was held up. There are some good boys here, wounded in Sicily, am fast making friends."

March 15, 1944

"Today I felt particularly good when one of the patients before he left apologised, sincerely apologised, for not seeing eye to

eye to me. We discussed his religion endlessly, but he is deeply religious, nor could I alter him—without God what then is there to live for? But his attitude is fine.

"Helen looked lovely yesterday, Lornja. She had that new brown suit which she was being measured for when you left, remember. And she asked me how it looked and I said it looked fine of course, for I remember it is an expensive business to say anything else—altho it is fine.

"Must think of you in your old age. Can see you now, probably you'll have a beard, just to compensate for your baldness, and so will I, and we'll be talking and we'll be telling the young folks about us when we were young and how things were in our days.

"Am having another, this time the last, operation this week. Should everything go well, a month's time and I'll be a free man. Perhaps you can understand how I feel laying here day after day and so much happening and so much to be done. There is a little bug inside me, it will not let me be, and it is a peaceful little bug, all it wants is just a little spot of work to do. . . .

"Night has intervened and it is now breakfast time. But am finding it difficult to get on with writing, what with talking and playing chess. Yes, I play chess and it absorbs and fascinates me. Gabarro is a front rank player, won cups in Catalonia and Spain for it. I had one game with him, he wiped the board with me and I enjoyed it and I learned much in the process. Do you play, Lornja? If so I can see many pleasant hours ahead when this bloody mess is cleaned up. Am saying so long now."

March 24, 1944

"Dear Doc,

"Had operation on Saturday. Am now back on colour again. Now sleep all night, wake up like a champ, bursting with energy. Before I was shot I had much energy, so much that I couldn't sit or stand still a minute and it seems if I look after my stomach I'll have much of it back again.

"It is good to be alive. The Red Army offensive relentlessly drives onwards. The whole system in Europe shakes. The future is ours, a future of glory, of peace, of happiness, when deeds of Reconstruction will surpass anything, will surpass the present deeds of destruction, and one is not a dreamer to see these things for they are rapidly moving up the agenda.

"Had a beautiful experience last night. Listened to Paul Robeson singing 'Mighty Like a Rose' and it moved me so much, right inside me I felt all soft and gentle and this makes me happy for so much that is beautiful leaves me unmoved. I read somewhere recently a tribute to Paul R., it was a unique tribute. One of the least of what was said was that he was the finest musical instrument fashioned by nature, and it is so, and he is truly great. You know, Lornja, am scheming, the scheme is to get me as many Paul R. records as I can.

"Sometimes, Lornja, my sense of humour insists and even the most serious becomes laughable. Now can you see the fellows here, big guys who a few weeks ago were killing Germans with guns and grenades, can you see them, well try and see them at a time when little children are still playing on the streets and they perforce are abed and thin, wailing, squeaky-voiced Sister is admonishing them to be quiet and at times threatening them too—and they are quiet, these German-killers.

"But as the star in the East appears so there is an awakening, and these lads are beginning to realise that the struggle for freedom is continuous and that there are other weapons than guns and grenades with which to fight it. From bed to bed, from ward to ward there circulates a letter and it is being signed by each and all and then it will be handed to the Almighty of Baguley, the Medical Superintendent, by a deputation of representatives from each ward. And the letter is 'an open letter to the Chef and whomsoever else it may concern' and in it one reads: 'We know there is a War On; many of us have been wounded in it. We know also that many will be the sacrifices

before the War is Won. But we don't think it is necessary that our food should be cooked so badly.' And it is suggested in the letter that a messing committee be set up. What will be the result? Of one thing I am sure, the fellows will learn the use of a new weapon—how to express their will effectively.

"I have heard from you but once since you arrived in Italy and so I think you must be busy, and if you are you are happy. But if you are not then I am being punished for what? Or maybe you are having or have had a spell of brownedoffness which I can well understand, for I am in a permanent state of it, and the epoch-making events that are almost a daily occurrence only make me more restive and impatient and I yearn literally with every fibre of my being to be away from here, to be up and doing, and only when I am will I become happy again.

"Best I have read for awhile. It's from America: 'If the Russians fire 200 salvoes when they get a victory, maybe if we fired 200 Washington Bureaucrats we would get a victory.' Will write you again soon. Look after yourself, Lornja.

"Salud

"Jack."

April 18, 1944

"Dear Doc,

"Just had a letter from Helen and she tells me you have at last been in action. You're glad, I'm glad. But without further ado I would tell you my good news. In about 14,400 minutes I should be up on my old grey mare and sailing away from here a free man and so I am happy and excited, much too excited to write you a coherent letter, and so my long exile in this out of the way, almost out of the world, place is nearing its end.

"Fine letter from Bill Alexander whom you have probably met by now. Alan Gilchrist who is with the 179/64 HAA Bty is also hoping to meet up with you and then will be formed the CMF Branch of the I.B.A.

"The leader of the main Greek resistance movement is an International Brigader—and so our pledge is being fulfilled.

"Salud."

But two months later, writing to Helen, Jack records the downfall of his schemes. He was out of hospital but a poisoned ankle kept him in bed for six weeks.

On June 9th, soon after Allied troops opened the Second Front in Europe, he writes to Helen:

"The ankle, the bloody thing, is slow in clearing up and I have little idea when I'll be up and on my way to London, maybe a month, maybe less, maybe more. But why am I writing about myself and my own petty troubles when our dreams, our hopes, have become reality. The Second Front is a fact. Our three years of struggle, of waiting, of anxiety and disappointments, are now ended.

"When something big happens I rarely become emotional but I want to do something about it. That is more or less how I express my feelings, by doing something, by action.

"I would be in France right now, or I would be with Lornja in Rome. Do you think he is in Rome? But no, it is bed for me, bed, bed, and more bed. Nearly nine months now that I have spent laying in beds. But I hope it won't be long until I'm on my feet again, until I see you again.

"Salud

"Jack.

"P.S. Give Johnnie a great big hug for me."

Hope and gloom alternate as the summer wears on and he is still in bed. He writes to Crome on August 12th, in a first letter for many weeks:

"If it does you any good you may know that I have in my mind written you hundreds of letters. When I heard of your M.C. I nearly brought myself to write you, and I would have

written 'Am mighty proud of you, I knew you would keep high and enhance the name of the I.B'.

"But I would have written too, I wish you bloody medicine men could doctor as well as you could fight; if you could I'd be up and doing instead of still be lying here in bed. Yes, am still in it doc, and now I am afraid to be optimistic.

"When I look back on the past year I see that there is much that I could have done that I have not done, especially in the way of study. But I have made many new friends—thirty, altho one or two may be lost—the hospital collected enough for about four beds in the Stalingrad hospital (£150 a bed). I raised something like £50 for various causes and a lot of people heard me and saw me doing things, lots of little things that wouldn't otherwise have been done.

"But I am trying to justify myself, my existence in face of all you guys in action are doing. I lie here, Lornja, and eat my heart out with longing. I long to be a part, a conscious active fighting part of the great battles against Fascism. And if I could I'd be in a dozen different places at once. I'd be with the glorious Red Army, with the Yugoslav Partisans, in the 8th Route Army, with the Maquis in France, there is no place I would not be, for everywhere is pregnant with experience. I long to be in London, sharing the dangers with our people. Maybe it is the romantic in me but I'd be wherever our people are in most danger, where the struggle is most dangerous.

"Always I have admired and been strengthened by the knowledge that inside Germany men and women have carried on the struggle against Fascism, thousands upon thousands have given their most precious possession, their lives, in the struggle, and so I would that I could be with them."

August 20, 1944

"Ankle continued healing, this week should see it healed, maybe, then it's soon I'll be gallivanting freely and at will wherever fancy takes me."

September 18, 1944

"The ankle flared up again. Actually the ankle had healed up when the flaring up started and there was my leg as big as a balloon and no place for the stuff to get out.

"Hope, hope, I live on hope these days, Lornja."

(To Helen)

September 26, 1944

"Things begin to improve again. But I dare not yet hope. Will it be long till it is better, how long? I don't know nor will I venture to guess. And so it is that my cross becomes heavier and I have yet to carry it longer and I cry 'How long, oh Lord, how long' but there is no answer, the Lord ain't listening maybe, maybe there ain't a Lord maybe.

"But fundamentally, away deep down I'm happy for the world becomes a cleaner better happier place to live in. 'The Regeneration of Mankind' started in 1917 extends to new millions of people and we too in Britain are striding forward. The distance may be far but developments are not at a speed as of old."

September 29, 1944

"For me, in these days, the downs in life are more than the ups, and were it not that the world becomes better and decenter and progress is on the march, it would be difficult, well-nigh unto impossible to lie here; for I've been lying almost continuously for about eighteen months. Were it that world of 39 and 40, that world of reaction in the saddle and all the dangers of switch, all the dangers that all that is progressive and decent in the world would have been attacked from every side, were it those days I don't know how I'd stick it. But the transformation is great and it is good and I will get better and I will be able to become a part of the ever changing stream of living things."

On October 12th, with that rejection of any attempt to treat

him as a hospital "case" which was always so strong with him, he wrote this to Crome:

"You would try to cheer me up with a lot of old corny stories, what a fool! You don't need to, you know, for most of the time I'm cheerful and cheeky. And the folks think I'm marvellously patient. I guess this is because I have sufficient control of my thoughts to prevent them having physical reactions. For my thoughts are filled with impatience. But I keep it to myself and only sometimes I let them escape, and generally in letters.

"What do you think, Lornja? Will it end as soon as many of us had hoped, had thought? Will it end this month? Will Xmas be a time of 'Peace on Earth' (the western part)? I don't know. The tempo of military action should soon reach a crescendo. When the Channel Ports are in full operation and more and more supplies reach our troops, when the regrouping of the Red Army's forces takes place—those that are now annihilating the Germans in the Baltics—then we can expect the crescendo. Yet... Fascist resistance is stiffening, so that Churchill may well be right when he says 'a few months of 1945 may be necessary to finish the job'.

"Have read your corny stories again and I think 'Poor old Lornja, what a state to be in, what corny stories'. Write me soon."

October, 1944

"Dear Helen,

"Away up high, that's where my spirits are, and they are away up there because my ankle gets better and better and soon if it keeps on healing at this rate I should be getting up and out of this bed.

"Your holiday was a lovely rest, but it was too short. I think a month is the ideal time for a holiday, and it will be some day, it will be when we become Socialist. And now you are back slaving away in the bloody kitchen. But you are reading this

in your room, or are you just having a breath of fresh air so I should not remind you of the sweltering hot house? . . .

"So you cooka fora forty people nowa? You'll make a good wife for some poor man some day. But I don't envy you at all. It is much work. It is too much work.

"But time will pass, and a day will come and Lornja and I will be sitting rattling our plates for food. You are not hurrying enough, and we are famished. The food will come and we will eat and like pigs will be satisfied, than we shall talk and discuss and plan a better, happier, healthier world for all, a world of plenty, of peace. Yes Helen, that day will come. And mayhaps it is not so far distant.

"Give Johnie his usual hug from me—or do you not give him the hug at all or only from yourself? That's mean of you."

And at last he wrote to Helen: "On Friday of this week I leave Manchester and five hours later I'll be in London. Roll on Friday!"

All through these months, despite moods of what he called "hospitalitis", Jack kept constantly in touch with the International Brigade Association and its campaigns, and correspondence with Brigaders in the camps continued over his signature.

The *Volunteer for Liberty*, journal of the Association, wrote in January, 1944:

"The name of Jack Brent has become that of a good friend to Brigaders in all parts of Spain, France and North Africa. One of the men released from Miranda del Ebro told us that Jack Brent was a name to conjure with. Here is a thought that has occurred to him in one of his letters:

"'We have much to thank the Spanish people for. They gave us rifles, they allowed us to fight Fascism with arms in our hands. The lesson, the experience, are tremendous. Who says we lost? Only those who cannot see the connection of events.'"

For a period in 1944, Jack stayed in Manchester with the I.B.A. president and former commander of the British Battalion, Sam Wild, who recalls:

"We used to get about 20 letters every morning coming for Jack and used to wonder what was up. He was keeping up with people he had recruited into the Party, discussing their problems and more or less giving them leadership by correspondence.

"In the hospital I have seen him lecture from his bed—literally lecture—on different subjects, mainly on current articles from the *Daily Worker*. He made 25 new readers, and recruited two male nurses for the Communist Party.

"While he was at my house it was a regular sight to see half a dozen Yanks arguing with him about Dialectics, and such things. A bunch of them stationed at Burtonwood made a wireless set for him, inscribed 'To Jack from the Boys'. They got the leather for it from a plane upholstered for Eisenhower. Once when I was speaking at a public meeting one of the Yanks commandeered a huge truck to take Jack there.

"He was forever laughing and telling yarns. It was a common sight to see one or two I.B. lads pushing Jack in a bath chair to the local pub. He had to be carried in and out. Once when I was carrying him out a chap passing by said: 'I've seen them come out in some states, but never that bad they couldn't walk'. Then again he would be in a pub and take a collection 'for the I.B.'. When they asked what that was, he would give them a talk and come out with a few bob."

Many friends have told of Jack's ever eager reaction to social and festive opportunity whenever it presented itself. There was his "escape" from hospital a week before Christmas, 1943.

"I remember Jack saying we could do with a bottle of whisky for Christmas", writes Mr. Tom Kenwright, who was his neighbour in the ward.

"I told him I could have got one in my home town, Warrington, 14 miles away. Next day he got out of bed, weak as the proverbial kitten, got two sticks, took my letter of introduction and stole out of the hospital. He took two buses each way and was back a few hours later with the precious bottle. There was a row. 'It's only Christmas once a year,' Jack pleaded. But how the devil he got there and back still beats me.

"I remember, too, a day when we were both allowed out of bed in wheel-chairs. In one of the wards we 'visited' we got into a debate with a ward sister on how a hospital *should* be run. Jack put a strong case for an all-embracing committee of staff and patients, which was naturally fantastic to the prim sister. Just then Dr. Gabarro walked in, and the sister told him about Jack's scheme, expecting 'Gabby' to pooh-pooh the idea. But he said drily that he thought Brent's idea very good. He said, too, that he would like to see all grades of staff confined to bed for six months, so as to be better able to appreciate the view-points of patients.

"Jack's clear explanation for the Party case, his patience, his tolerance of hostile viewpoints and his readiness to fall in with whatever pastimes were indulged in (many strictly non-political of course) made him a respected figure to all."

How warm and instant was this communion with his fellow men is readily seen in a letter he wrote on March 17th, which he dated "St. Patrick's Day", to a Hampstead friend, Ester Cotton.

"There are a few Irish and Liverpool Irish boys in here, 8th Army boys, good boys, and we are discussing all day long and they are lapping up my reading matter."

The letter goes on:

"Couple of days ago one of the fellows who had been here a long time left. He was wounded in Libya and captured there

by the Italians, came back about a year ago, is deeply religious, strongly too. We had many discussions and arguments, was continually trying to get him to join and when he left he thanked me first for all the discussion and then apologised, really sincerely apologised, for not joining the Party. 'Maybe some day,' he said, and I felt good.

"Had a long interesting letter from Doc Crome. He is in Italy, was in Spain, is now Capt in the R.A.M.C. with the 8th Army. He meets up with some escaped Russian prisoners, escaped from Germany. But what impressed, thrilled and inspired me was the story of two of them who escaped together. Right there in the midst of the Nazi fortress they carried on guerilla warfare for several months before getting into France where they were helped by literally everyone including policemen.

"Men of a special mould, such is the Red Army, such is Socialism.

"Fellow just taken the next bed to me, came from Sicily, shell splinters got his face. He looked at the plaque of Stalin on the wall and remarked 'That's the guy'. But more than that I do not know of him. Plenty of time tho.

"Am having a tough job with one or two of the boys—anti-semitism, and they are not bad boys either. It is prejudices strengthened by one or two experiences. I try from every angle and yet I feel that I leave them maybe a little shamefaced yet fruitful soil for similar filthy propaganda. I was busy arguing with one of the boys last night when the night sister came around and she hearing our conversation started in hammer and tongs on the Jews. None of us like her, often we wonder how we could serve her up to the worms, and so when she had dried up, I told the fellow: 'See the company you keep'. And believe me this had a salutary effect on him because he hates her guts too and she is so stupid which is one of the things I tried to drum into him—that anti-semitism could only exist on ignorance, prejudice, or stupidity but never on reason. But it all makes me kinda sick inside me.

"It is half past nine, my hot milk has come, the lights will be going out and I will sleep, morning will come and will write you more then . . .

"It was a long time before I got to sleep last night, thought about you, thought and thought about all sorts of things. But I got off eventually and now it is morning, news has just finished, the news 'The Red Army keeps on going', good news.

"You know, Ester, for all I have done here, despite all I've tried to do, yet I haven't managed to achieve anything fundamental. I have failed completely with the nurses, even the one I concentrated on. I was able to get her father and brother-in-law whom I haven't seen yet into the Party thro writing, but not her, no, she won't join until her boy friend comes back to this country, sure he'll join too. 'But if you join now he will be proud of you'. But has no effect.

"Have a book here, *Nursing Life and Discipline*, written by a woman doctor. It is written in a liberal style, a style not to hurt the susceptibilities even of the most Florence Nightingalish of the nurses or sisters and I have made good use of it. But has it had any effect? none that I can see. One of the doctors sees the need of something but doesn't see very clearly. It is funny when he says to me: 'You know, Brent, I'm much redder than you think, altho am not as Red as you.'—'What's stopping you, doc?'"

Scores of letters he wrote to his grandmother in Whithorn during these years have been lost. She had begun to fail in health before the war and she died not long after Jack left Manchester. He was again in hospital at the time and could not go to her.

The family was strongly knit. Here is a letter, warm with kinship, written to his aunt in November, 1943, at the height of the war:

"Dear Nannie,

"And May. How are you both now and the baby? You know, so long as you drop me a line, even if but rarely, so long

as I know I can look to you as my mother's friend and therefore my best friend, then you don't have to be sorry when I sometimes write two letters to your one. I know you're probably thinking what puir wee Georgie is doing. It makes me happy to know this, more happy than one letter could make me.

"I hope soon to be out of here. Yes, my wound is almost healed up. Should be completely so within another ten days. Needless to say I look forward eagerly and yearningly to be out, yet my eagerness is mingled with a touch of sadness. You see I like it here, have made many friends, have been happier here than one normally expects to be in a hospital, and happier than I've been in any other hospital in this country.

"But I shall be happy to meet my friends in London again. For there too I have many good friends, many very good friends of every nationality, Germans, Italians, Czechs, Russians, Spanish, English, all anti-Fascist, all men who have been fighting Fascism for years. Some of them have suffered much at the hands of Fascism, for years numbers of them have been in concentration camps. Such friendships are strong ties. We would give our very lives for each other.

"I would be happy if I could come and see you all at New Year. But I don't think I'll be able to. For I expect to go into another hospital as soon as possible and I want to go in as soon as possible because I want to get out as soon as possible. And anyhow I'm sure it is better to come in the Summer time, in the warm weather and long nights and when I can stay for at the very least two weeks. I'm looking forward to this.

"Have you heard from Christie and Jim lately? I guess you are worried about them. Sure it is quite natural and I guess too that you are wondering when and how it will all end. Well, how it ends depends on us, the people. When will it end? There are indications that the beginning of the year, probably in the early spring, will see large-scale operations in Western Europe. Only when this happens can we say that the war will soon be won. In fact one could almost say that from the moment the

landing in Europe takes place the war will not last more than three months. For the moment such landings take place we shall see tremendous happenings. First the Red Army will go over to the all-out offensive, an offensive which will surpass anything the Red Army has yet done. Secondly, in every occupied country in Europe millions of people, guerillas, will rise up to help our boys and in helping them will save many of their lives. I tell you those things, nor do I apologise for doing so, everyone ought to know them.

"Had a letter from John, he has had another move, nor does he seem very enthusiastic about his new place. You say James will miss his son who has gone to the navy. I guess so. Millions of others miss their sons too. Give my greetings to Mrs. Smith, it is Mrs. Smith from the Mains, yes, I can remember going up many times, generally with shoes or boots. I might say not only was she one of the rare ones who paid on the dot but she always gave me something to myself, yes, I remember. I liked her very much and Hughie, he was always kinda weak, or rather not very strong. I want you to give all the folks my greetings, mention me specially to Mrs. Jolly, tell me how she is. I never remember my mother, without thinking of Mrs. Jolly, of Jock, Bill, Frank, Davy. Without them I have no childhood. They are mixed and mingled with those early years. And to you, well, I wish you everything you wish yourself. Give May a hug for me.

"Greetings

"Geordie"

Chapter VI

IT'S COMING YET

Don't mistake me. Don't think I am saying that our old mother treated us badly. Under the circumstances she did wonders. She worked her fingers to the bone, slaved all her life—and for the ease and comfort of others, so little of either did she get for herself, because so much had the others whose labours were so little.

Such was the world she lived in, such it has been for millions. So it is today, and so it will be until we the people do what the people of Russia did in 1917 under the guidance of the Party, our Party. There they put into practice and still practise those things which are everywhere else only preached about—the brotherhood of man.

And as Burns said—"It's coming yet, for a' that."

(*From a letter to Whithorn, December*, 1948.)

HE was a man whose vision of the future would not let him die. In the last year of the war and through the seven years of living in pain which followed he placed himself right to the fore in the great battles conducted by his Party and his class for the fruits of victory, for peace and socialism.

With worsening severity his wound told on his strength and limited his range of action, as the periods spent out of hospital became shorter. But the fiery heart and questing mind suffered no loss or waste.

He returned to London in October, 1944. Three months later he was back in hospital, at Oxford. A letter from there on January 28th in the following year, said:

"Come next Monday and they are for chopping off my foot and a bloodigoodjobtoo. Have had it far too long; have had too much trouble with it, expensive trouble, to miss it.

"The Red Army—it has a way of doing things. Will it be in Berlin soon? Everybody seems to think so but there is much to be done before Berlin, and the most necessary is the meeting

between the Big Three to clear the way for the last *combined* blows. Maybe they will meet soon. The Red Army has a way, too, of forcing issues . . ."

The amputation was to remove diseased bone. It was successful and in May he was welcomed back at a meeting of the executive committee of the International Brigade Association in London. Elected honorary secretary, he was back at work in the office the following month, taking his part in the campaign to send relief to the survivors of the 400,000 Spanish Republicans who had crossed into France when the Spanish war ended.

Here is what a fellow member of the Brigade's London Committee, Tony Gilbert, writes of this period when Jack was once again, in his own pet phrase, "getting around and seeing some folks".

"I met him shortly after my demob. There had been a meeting of London Brigaders and Nan Green, Jack Brent and Peter Kerrigan held our attention because the work they had done for Spanish democrats during the world war was amazing.

"Jack mobilised friends of Republican Spain in groups. He kept such a close check on speakers for trade union branches, on circularising these branches, checking dates and so on, that the name 'Reminder' was tagged to him.

"That year *Spain Today* came out in attractive magazine form. On the day it came from the printers he organised a dozen friends to form a line at Hyde Park and 200 copies were sold in an hour. No friend of Spain will forget the mighty Jarama meeting at the Palace Theatre. That packed meeting was a credit to his determination that such a large demonstration could be successfully held. His enthusiasm had all working with a will.

"It was a tonic to be out and about with him. On a bus, in a queue, on the street, his friendly, human approach made

conversation easy and he would oppose reactionary ideas and support progressive ones wherever he heard them.

"I saw him make one of his many Communist recruits in this way. A lass on a bus was boldly attacking the warmongers. We got off at her stop. A lively discussion over a cup of tea—and she agreed to join our Party before we said so long. In those five years, when his influences shaped my future, how proud I was to receive his letters with 'Your pal Jack' at the bottom."

His singular acts, his huge jests, the spirit of adventure that fired him, his exploits in almost every human key—each of his friends has something special to remember for these years. Nan Green, who took over Jack's work as secretary, recalls this: "I can remember him sitting by the fireplace with a huge plate of Christmas dinner and a terrific smile. Jack said to Frances and Martin, when some kids came to see them, 'nip upstairs'. Then he pretended he had never heard of Frances and Martin and made the kids believe they were in the wrong house. How we all laughed."

In 1946 the Moscow Dynamos came to Britain to play football. No argument or plea or fear could keep him away from the game they played with the Arsenal. Helen Crome writes: "So we went. Len, myself and Jack. He couldn't use his sticks, he had to go on Len's shoulders. The gates broke and we started moving. We got right to the front where Jack had a very good view of the game, but I was sure they would both be killed. I was all torn, my stockings and handbag, it was terrifying."

Operation followed operation. His other leg was narrowly saved in 1946, and grave complications set in, reducing still further his spells of freedom. Courage and spirit alone kept him going. Early in 1949 he was writing to his brother and to John's wife Margaret in Whithorn:

"Pain, pain, incessant pain daily and hourly. I have been living on dope for the last couple of years. At last I see the end.

On Wednesday last week I had a lumbar sympathectomy on the left side. Things are already easier.

"Now the medicine men have got hold of *you* [John]. Well, unless you want to run into a whole packet of trouble you must stick to the diet and rest. The sweat is pouring out of me, so I'll enclose a cheque, folks, and hope it helps for a little. Will send more later.

"Love, Geordie."

Never for long, though, was his zest for life clouded. Friends would often be surprised, after one of Jack's worst spells, to receive a breezy, quipping and demanding letter.

"Got one or two wants", he writes from hospital in a letter to a friend, Chris Maxwell. The letter goes on:

"Still on physeptone. Cigarettes are nearly finished, but I have already gotten my supply for this week—so am wondering if you can rustle up some somewhere soon lass, desperately soon . . . And lastly, at least I think it is lastly, is s—u—g—a—r. Yes am near the end of the two pounds I brought in. You know I find it impossible to have sugar without offering it to my next door neighbours.

"One of whom is an old Jewish man from Russia originally, that is forty-five years ago. He is nice old guy and has already diagnosed my pain—putting on and taking off my leg too often says he, and I can't convince him otherwise so don't try any more. He is not really political but when I told him I was a Communist he patted me on the shoulder and said 'Good boy'.

"My other bedmate is a different problem, he is young, maybe about my age or near it, a draughtsman, a snob, and very daily express opinionated. Said he yesterday in a discussion: 'All the Political Parties are more or less the same'—and I enquired in protest 'But surely you're not including the Communist Party in that statement?' 'Oh no', says he, 'they're just rats'. Of

course I made him retract but don't suppose I'll do much with him. Don't like him either. He is all the time telling me what a rogue, what a scrounger or what a liar this or that other patient is. I never can agree with him . . ."

About this time came a characteristic episode while he was "out and around" again for a few months. An African student was lodging with him in Hampstead and Jack was at once drawn deeply into the African peoples' problems.

One of the students who visited the house recalls that it was on Jack's suggestion that a group began to meet regularly in his room "to discuss matters pertaining to our struggle for freedom".

"We gathered together mostly African workers, including some students, and Jack drew up for us a programme of work. We had very instructive discussions, with Jack unobtrusively helping to guide the direction of our thoughts. We got some little Marxist pamphlets and studied them, and also organised the sale of Marxist literature. Out of this group I think about four people joined the Communist Party—one student, and I think three workers.

"The impression which he left on all of us was one of very great charm. He keeps on making small cracks about things which make people laugh. One indelible impression: he was suffering greatly, but he was always talking about the triumph of communism and the working class. And one of the things that we got after leaving Jack was that it was a wonderful thing to be a Communist if Communism could give to a man in his situation such courage.

"From him we learnt a lot about the Spanish civil war, the part played in it by the working classes of all countries, and the continued struggle of the Spanish workers today for freedom and democracy in their country. The interest he aroused in us in the I.B.A. still remains.

"To know Jack is an experience in itself. He radiates calm confidence and love. He did more than anyone else to make many of those boys not only sympathetic to Communism but desirous of being associated with a party which could produce such a man."

The Rev. Derrick Jorns, who was ward chaplain at a Brentwood hospital where Jack spent some months in 1948 and 1949 has written:

"He called me to his bedside after a ward service and asked for a Bible because he told me the reading of 1 Corinthians xiii* was the finest philosophy he had ever heard. I shall always remember his words: 'That chap has got something there.'

"He radiated a calm happy warmth of friendship and fellowship in the ward where agony is the common heritage of all who lie there waiting for they know not what. The tiny children who came to the Services from the Children's Ward were a special joy to him and I well remember Christmas 1948 with Jack insisting that his gift of £5 for his young friends should be anonymous.

"We talked of war, of peace, of ordinary people and extraordinary people too—always I felt here was a great soul whose very being could not fully express its hopes, longings and visions which found their birth in his great heart. When the limitations of time and space are broken down and we live with a clearer vision and in greater joy I know Jack Brent will be there full of fun, full of enthusiasm and above all full of understanding for those whose minds are not as sensitive as his own. No words of mine can express the joy, the memories or the thankfulness I feel in my heart for having met him."

* Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

A neighbour who became Jack's friend in these years says that people will want to know what there was so unusual about Jack, why his personality was so out of the common. Already there is a kind of idolising about him, he adds, and so a tendency among some people to disbelieve his existence. He writes:

"So perhaps it is as well to begin with his faults. They were, I think, the natural excess of his qualities. The cause of the Communist Party always came first with him. He was always prepared to give. He expected the same from others without taking into account that others were not ready to go to the same lengths.

"He was always borrowing books. If he thought a book good he would immediately lend it to as many people as he knew. This happened to borrowed books as well as his own, often to the chagrin of the original owner who would see a cherished volume vanish into the ocean of Jack's acquaintances. Very many of his own books disappeared that way and eventually he kept a record of all he lent.

"He would say of something: 'It must be done.' After all the possible arguments against such a thing being possible. He was always short of money yet could never bring himself to cancel a Party publication he was taking regularly. He set us an example in the number of copies of pamphlets he would dispose of long after we had given up selling them.

"The first time I ever saw him I could not help seeing what everybody else must have seen, the imposing forehead and the intelligent face combined with the liveliness of his talk. Here was a man who did things. Here was a man one could argue violently with and not have to fear that a reckless word would offend.

"He knew exactly what he was worth, he could thus afford to forget himself. Although critical of others he would never think the worst of anybody, being one who did not believe in original sin. He would give some people credit long after they

ceased to deserve it—that is in personal matters, he had no charity for a renegade. He often rebuked people for gossiping and only once did I hear him condemn somebody, and that was for being a 'malicious gossip'.

"Jack had no illusions about the extent of his own knowledge, but his interests were as wide as the world and he would enter into every discussion. He said: 'There is no limit to what a man can learn.'

"He was a man of many schemes, whether it was rearranging his room, bringing new order into his books, raising money for the I.B.A. or even running somebody else's life. We would bring a new face along and Jack would relentlessly investigate and reshape him. The new face would sweat under the interrogation and desperately try to keep up with all the changes that were going to be made in his existence.

"He never did it in a spirit of idle curiosity. He had as many interests as there are people and he knew only too well the misery that life can be in our society.

"He was very fastidious in his tastes, both in clothes and food. It was nice to see him display himself in a new suit or show a new and sometimes very fancy tie.

"He hated pity and pity never entered into his relationship with people. He was however sensitive on that point and often when help was offered him he would refuse it sharply."

The Spanish Republican exiles in Britain knew him as a tireless helper in their many difficulties and in their struggle for recognition as anti-fascist allies. One of their leading personalities recalls:

"You felt always you had not the slightest jealousy. People want to be first—often you admire people but you know there is a bit of that. He was completely free of it. He was really glad when you were succeeding, or when he was succeeding. When

he criticised, you never got hurt—he was at the same time respectful."

Throughout 1948 and 1949 his condition grew worse and there were several crises. Writing in November, 1949, to Paula, a well loved friend who looked after him in early Hampstead days, he told her how his weight had gone down to seven stone and the hospital people had begun to think of "getting me into a place for chronics—such would have been my fate if the witchdoctors had their way". But now, he went on, he was better, though still in hospital.

"Actually I am very happy and well contented here, for the nurses are really lovely—and to look at as well—and I look often and long and with great pleasure, especially at the Staff nurse, who is small, chic, kind, friendly and lovely beyond words. She's a picture indeed.

"The day is long and many opportunities present themselves for propaganda. And although they generally believe all the lying filth and venom, it is an apathetic, unenthusiastic belief. Their active feelings, which are at all times strongly expressed, are on the question of war and peace. There is abroad a feeling of revulsion and horror at all the warmongering. As Uncle Joe put it, the horrors of the last war are still too sharp and close in people's memories. . . ."

A month after this letter, in December, 1949, at the invitation of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, Jack flew to Prague, where he spent seven months, all in hospital.

It was a visit to which he had long looked forward, with all his ardour for new experience, all his longing to see the new lands where the fight against fascism begun in Spain had brought so triumphant an outcome for the people.

Chapter VII

GRAND VISION

Before I went I tried to picture life in Czechoslovakia, I saw it in some ways similar to what I experienced in Spain, I pictured the same warm comradeship that permeated life in Spain, that same sense of dignity and freedom. Nor was I wrong.

A JOURNEY from London to Brno by air, a day-long vigil in a high balcony overlooking Prague's Wenceslas Square as the workers swung by in mighty parade for May Day, a trip by car through the lush spring countryside of Bohemia, a few visits to Czech and English friends in their Prague homes—Jack saw little more in the bed-ridden months that followed a major abdominal operation in February, 1950.

Yet it was enough. His letters said: workers run this country, this is the dream coming true, what I see brings me happiness. The quick insight and instinct of participation tempered over the years served him well. He wrote:

"If you spent an hour in a country, no matter which, and walked the streets and kept your eyes open and observed and pondered on what you saw, you could learn a great deal. It goes for London as well as Moscow, Manchester, Prague, Paris. Try it yourself sometime, folks . . ."

For most of February he lay desperately ill, unconscious or deeply drugged for most of the time. Hope that he could live almost died. But in March and April he was better, the queue of visitors was there again, the bedside circles were in swing and a stream of letters spreading his good cheer and tidings to friends old and new began to flow.

"I grabbed a pen and began tackling the job"—he writes in a

letter on May 15th, speaking of the mountain of unanswered letters by his bed—"And mighty was my relief, for mighty was my conscience and I started writing and once started was as happy as the proverbial lark in song all day. And I wrote all day, day after day diminishing the pile. Just nineteen more letters to write."

And he goes on, "scribbling and letting sequence, sense and subject look after themselves," telling of magic glimpses of "this loveliest city" from a car window, of his splendid treatment in the best nursing home in Czechoslovakia, of his own expert comparisons of British and Czech medical services, of food and dress and gaily clothed peasant children and books and friends.

"Although I now have a colostomy it has helped reduce the pain so much that I need no drugs and am getting fat. I believe it is purposely done in order that I can be used for export to advertise the wonderful medical service here. And indeed it is. Words are not enough to praise it justly, and mind you, I am an expert in a kind of way, for I have been in some thirty and more hospitals in five different countries. And not one of them ships in the night that float in and out and nobody remembers.

"No, I usually became part of the furnishings, to be dusted and polished daily and kept in place for decorative or is it safety purposes? In short I became the old-timer, too knowing and to be taken for granted, for I won't ever die in hospital. I've had as many operations as hospitals I've been in. So I sometimes think I am a part of the medical profession myself, but unfortunately on the wrong side and it never seems to end, although each time I feel it is the last and at last I can cock a snook at all hospitals. And I hope I don't have to go into any more for am sure I shall find it unbearable in an English hospital, after the experiences I have had. Nor am I trying to run down English nurses or doctors. No, in the main they have been marvellous and equal to any; no, it is the hospitals themselves, dirty, dull,

dreary, designed to create disease not health, which indeed they retard. And the whole system is as dreadful as the hospitals are dull."

In letters to John and Margaret he tears away at this subject on which he was always ready to lecture all comers with the greatest knowledge and conviction, and passes on naturally from this favourite theme to the grand vision that shone for him in even the most ordinary things and events:

"Wish you could have been here for indeed the hospitals here are beautiful places where one can rest, relax and be contented, nor is one bound down by a white, uniform, unending day-after-day routine, and daft, dull dreary discipline such as is so general in British Hospitals; and there is the food which to an ill person is all important. It is as uniform, dull and dreary and terribly tasteless as the routine, whilst here it is the most pleasant experience of the day when food is served, and on silver platters and all, and now I have an appetite like a horse and soon I'll be as fat as a horse too.

"Now I do not have to take any drugs at all. This is a truly tremendous thing for me because I was taking so much drug before coming here that several times I took too much and nearly finished myself off and all the time I could hardly move away from the bed since I was always in a semi-drunken state which was the effect of the drugs on me. Now all that is finished thanks to our Czechoslovak comrades. There are no words sufficient to express the tremendous gratitude I feel for what has been done for me. This hospital is an elegant place, never seen the like of it before. It used to be a private place run for the very rich. A similar joint in Britain would cost from £20 to £30 a week just for accommodation, service and food. On top of that would be the doctor's fee, the surgeons and all the incidental medicines. In fact I would be a few hundred pounds in somebody's debt if I were not here in a country which now

belongs to the workers, a country truly on the road to socialism and a new life for the people.

"Here there are some 500 patients, yet only 20 fully trained nurses. But they have more orderly and cleaning staff than is normal in an English hospital, which leaves the nurses completely free to nurse. Then from amongst the patients themselves have come many volunteers to train as nurses. They are actually training whilst undergoing treatment and it has proved beneficial not only for the other patients but for themselves. It proves that where there is a will there is a way.

"I now have a much more realistic and clearer picture of what the workers, once they seize and hold power, can achieve in creating the conditions for a new and happy life for the majority of people. True there are some who don't like it. Those who never worked but lived in lazy luxury—the speculators and other sharks who operated quite safely in previous times.

"I thought such places as the one I am in were only in dreams. But the workers in power bring to reality the dreams that made them struggle over and again against any and every tyrant. And so it will be in our land someday and not so distant, for the day draws near when the great and greedy will be thrown upon the dung-heap of history, like the Hitlers, Napoleons, etc. ad lib. For when the people awake, and awake they will, no power on earth can stay their onward and upward march to a glorious future, to Communism, when man tae man the world o'er shall brithers be for a' that, and so I get lyrical for it is in the air for spring spreads her green mantle everywhere and life throbs and surges anew and Praha in spring is a sight to warm the heart, so beautiful, colourful and festive, and I could happily stay here all my life.

"On Monday, May Day, have got a place in Wenceslas Square from which will be able to have a grandstand view of the May Day parade. Am eager and longing to see it, for have never seen a really mass parade except the films of the Soviet workers in the Red Square which was even on a film a wondrous

impressive sight. And one thinks it is these workers the American and Anglo atomic maniacs plan to slaughter by the millions, just because they prefer to live and work by their own efforts and not upon the sweat and toil of others a la American Way of Life. But their plans of desperation, because of their nearer coming end, are doomed to failure, and the planners as well, and it is this fear that makes them desperate with the desperation of the damned and doomed and dying. And it is the millions upon millions of people like you John who are determined whatever the cost not to fight on the side of fascism and Anglo-American Imperialism.

"I wonder if you have seen the peace petition which is even now circulating in every country in the world. If not, if you write to 'The British Peace Committee, 1A Park Crescent, London W.1.' They will send you some forms and am sure most of the young fellows and old ones too and the mothers especially would sign it, and Whithorn would thenceforth take its place in the struggle for peace and be an example to the thousands of other villages all over the country. Hope you can do something, for something must be done if we are to live our life and build a future for the children, for wee John.

"About my coming to Whithorn and believe me, folks, I want to so much more than you can imagine, for even now after more than twenty years awandering I still yearn and long for home, for the faces and folk ever familiar amongst whom I grew up, and would never leave if the world was not the mad house we live in, and some of us get caught up and must fight the madness . . .

"Solong
"Geordie."

By the end of April, he was well on the mend. After sprucing up for an hour or two in a gleaming new linen suit he would wring a few hours' leave out of the doctors for a "sally round the toon", to visit friends, to cook them an omelette which he would

advertise highly, to talk, joke and play with their children, to go to an exhibition, or just to breathe in the spring air, with a rapturous grin, on an island in the river Vltava or on Petrin Hill, the blossomy park in the centre of Prague.

It was often midnight before he was back, with irresistible excuses and a tale of the day's deeds which he always seemed fully able to communicate, without a word of Czech, to the nurses and orderlies waiting in some anxiety for his return.

His big outing came on May Day. They gave him a sixth-floor window overlooking the square. He would not budge from it from eight in the morning until two in the afternoon, leaning forward to watch the multitude of people. For two days after he was very ill, with the strongest pains. Then he wrote:

"I wish I could tell you in such a way that you could feel the same surging pride I felt when I watched the parade. What a wonderful spectacle. For seven hours I watched thousand upon thousand march past proclaiming their strength, proudly proclaiming their new life, passionately proclaiming peace."

One night returning to the hospital he told friends: "Now I do not have to dope myself to kill the pain and this has helped my mind to clear. What a wonderful thing it is to be able to think clearly, to read good literature, to enjoy music, the Soviet films. Yes, the best part is having a clear mind *today*."

The same friends—Americans—chaffed him once about Britain being a colony of Wall Street. Quick came the crack: "The liberation movement in the colonies is going great guns. Don't be too sure it won't catch on in Britain, too."

From another outing he came back late because, as he said, he had been "getting acquainted with the Life Force". Someone had mentioned an article describing the Leningrad experiments of Professor Lepeshinskaya on the properties of living cells, and the success of her laboratory experiments on the formation of cells. He said: "Let's have it." And for two hours he sat

listening to a word-by-word translation of the article, insistent and enthralled to the end.

His thoughts turned more strongly homeward as a measure of health came back. He was writing to John and Margaret soon after May Day:

"Always I long so much to see you and all the folks and I want above all to get to know the 'wee fellah'. You tell him from me that I left the Iron Curtain where it has always been—i.e. in the British newspapers and other propaganda channels. When one sees the tremendous things which are happening here then one understands why they created such a curtain. For it is absolutely essential to the further existence of the fast decaying corrupt capitalist system that the ordinary man in Britain should not know what wonderful achievements the workers in the Socialist countries have to their credit. In fact it is necessary to completely falsify the picture otherwise there would be a great awakening among the British workers.

"But I don't want to write you a long letter this time. I just wanted to tell you am still fine but still don't know how long I'll be here and I wanted to say hello howdo hope you too are fine and give wee John a big hug and kiss for me.

"Geordie."

In July, 1950, fuller than ever in his life with schemes and plans and hopes, Jack returned to London.

Chapter VIII

WE MUST, YOU KNOW

> He had great hopes all the same. He used to tell old William Boyce —he was about eighty-four—he used to tell him he had high hopes of being completely cured. He used to say when we get socialism they would give him a new part and he would be completely cured. And William said: "That'll never be in our time." "Well," he says, "William, you're eighty-four and you'll live to see it. I'll live to see it, and you certainly will." (*John Dickie.*)

BACK to London, back to the streets and tube stations and meeting halls shifted Jack's scene of battle. He returned full into the midst of the war hysteria being whipped up in Britain over Korea. The organised struggle for peace, initiated and led by his Party, was in its early, difficult stages. The criminal American fraud which said the war was necessary to discourage aggression had not yet been generally detected.

"I had kinda forgotten"—he wrote to a Prague friend soon after his return—"what it feels like to have war talk coming at you from every angle. And they've created a lot more angles. But they have still a long way to go, for though the people swallow lots of the propaganda they still are not very keen on another war."

War could be prevented. He was sure. With that instinct which had matured in him for the central point of every struggle, he entered at once into this last great battle of his life with unexampled directness and lucid simplicity.

"We Communists," he wrote, "are not yet fully mobilised on the question of Peace." And with Jack action did not so much follow thought as form its simultaneous part. From the early days of his return this conviction that peace could win,

was the idea and the task that filled his mind and talk and active hours.

He remembered Spain. How the struggle there had brought swift awakening to the fascist war danger, although too late. He would say that the fight to end the war in the Far East would "have a similar effect on the forces of progress in the world". But it must be Spain in reverse, it must succeed.

The secretary of the Adelaide, Hampstead, branch of the Communist Party, Eddie Woods, has written in moving words of the events that followed his first visit, made somewhat in the spirit of carrying out a formal call, to the wounded Brigader whose fearful disabilities and already numerous responsibilities in the movement he well knew.

"I remember thinking"—he writes—"how little else I could expect from him. How wrong I was. At once he took his turn on the roster of *Daily Worker* sellers. He did his selling propped up against the wall outside Chalk Farm station. Always had a friendly sally for passers-by, an encouraging word for the readers, a ready joke for the kids.

"His work on the collection of signatures for the Five-Power Peace Pact Appeal was an example and a spur. He would sit there with his canes and shout to the people: 'Sign here for Peace!'

"One morning he and I sat at a table with a large folding poster showing the flags of the Big Five. A well-dressed smug-looking individual smiled cynically at us.

"'Sign for Peace,' chanted Jack, 'Millions have already signed.' The man leaned over the table and said: 'Stupid imbecile.' I forgot all those exhortations about patience and not being provoked, grabbed his arms and said: 'Beat it, you ignorant b——.'

"Jack heard me and laughed. 'You'll not get many signatures that way, Eddie,' he said."

His ground-floor room at a block of flats near the station

became like a nerve-centre of the fight. Book and ticket sales, socials, gramophone recitals, burning debate, friendly chaff and illuminating cracks—all this life took root there as the news got round that Brent was home, and callers came, and the tea kettle was on from early morning to early morning.

Very soon after his return the walls of his room were gay with pin-ups—anything bright and lively that took his fancy in the papers and magazines. There were pictures of the great works of Communist Construction in the Soviet Union, the faces of proud and hopeful young people from the new countries in Europe where the people reign, the kind and wise face of Chairman Mao of China.

The deeds of the New China enthralled him. "I remember him looking at a picture showing a mass lecture at the North China People's Revolutionary College, Peking," Eddie writes.

"'Look at that, Eddie,' he said. 'That's the sort of education classes we want. Just imagine a class that size on our programme the *British Road to Socialism*—filling Trafalgar Square!'"

The parties were always a social success and made money, though never as much as he would like. This was how in the summer of 1950 Jack collected £75 needed to produce a leaflet exposing Franco's support for Hitler during the war, published largely on his initiative by the International Brigade Association.

"There was one side of him"—Eddie's account concludes—"which cannot be conveniently listed, which I believe will only be fully understood when, in the future, we reap the benefit from those maturing comrades who were privileged to know him. His enthusiasm and communicative warmth. One always left him with a strengthened determination to work harder than ever for the ending of the present corrupt and mouldering system of society. Jack had a phrase when difficulties seemed unsurmountable which went: 'but we must, you know'. How well

I remember that. How grateful I was for his very real advice on *how* 'we must'."

A vivid picture of Jack's home life in these days is given by an American International Brigader and his wife, Paul and Bell Skup, with whom he shared his flat.

"He loved people, the more the merrier"—Bell writes—"And it just never seemed right to him that we shouldn't use every event—birthdays, homecomings, farewells, holidays—to make some dough for the I.B. or the *Worker*. My small boy Eric was fascinated by his artificial leg and open-mouthed when Jack first demonstrated knee action with it, making the leg dance. In games Jack sometimes used the leg as a machine gun, sometimes let Eric do so. It never occurred to any of the kids to play in another room unless Jack was out, sleeping or 'entertaining'.

"He loved to eat good food and wholeheartedly despised food that was badly cooked. Soups were his passion, and spicy foods. He treasured a few cook books, considered himself a connoisseur of good cooking, and a good cook himself. He would stand at the kitchen door and offer his valuable (he said) advice. I always felt a real pleasure when he enjoyed any of my dishes. Much of the time he was in too much pain to enjoy any food but when he was the least bit better he'd be asking for something special. The frying-pan was a bone of contention with us. He was all for never washing it out—just wiping it clean each time. I was an earnest washer-outer. When I produced a fluffy omelette, he'd say 'Just think of the miracle you could produce in a properly not-washed-out pan.'

"How delighted he was when a cat belonging to a doting woman in the apartments escaped her anxious eye and got pregnant. The woman would take the cat to the coal heap every morning, talking baby talk to it. Jack listened furtively at the kitchen or his own window. He felt sorry for the cat forced to

live such an uncat-like life. He used to urge it in pseudo-whispers —we shushed him—to go out and sin some more.

"Once he started to get about he was often at the International Brigade office and always came home full of enthusiastic schemes to earn money and a portfolio full of letters and petitions.

"We never knew who might be dropping back with him and the discussions would go on into the wee hours. We had some humdingers. Thrashing out the role of the Communist artist in a Socialist state and in a capitalist state; the education of our children, or the conflict of parents who give too much of their time to Party tasks; the pros and cons of the latest Pollitt pamphlet; just about everything from soup to nuts. We had a free-for-all three day discussion on propaganda when Tony Gilbert came to stay with us for a week. Tony and Jack were at it tooth and nail. They were old friends and comrades, very fond of each other, but boy, could they argue!

"He was always marking stuff in his literature for special people to read. He loved books and would talk of certain books as if they were alive. One he brought back from Czechoslovakia really thrilled him. It was a number of short stories about ordinary Soviet citizens and their experiences against the Nazis. Jack would glow, telling some of them to people. We found the book doubly thrilling.

"One day the butcher delivered our order and Jack persuaded him to have tea with us and they exchanged experiences, for Jack was once a butcher's boy. The butcher signed the peace petition and went away with a couple of pamphlets. Later he told me with awe in his voice: 'He's quite a lad, that Jack, ain't he!' The repairman from the gas company used to come in to get the latest on Korea. People passing Jack's window paused for a little chat and ended up talking for hours.

"He was very fastidious, kept his clothes very neatly and once even showed me how to fold socks so that they lay flat and didn't stretch the tops. He had a real system of packing for hospital. He'd sit on the floor and surround himself with little piles of

literature, weighing in his mind what to take and what to leave.

"One little boy came to the flat at every conceivable opportunity. He would stay for a couple of hours, just reading or listening and then he would take himself off just as quietly. He wanted to live with Jack, because, he said, Jack was *his* friend and Jack's room therefore *his* room and anyway Jack didn't mind if he didn't say much."

In January, 1951, with some easing of his condition, Jack went back to work at the International Brigade Association headquarters, where he served again as London secretary. Some account of the manifold activities in which he was now plunged—and poignant glimpses of the effort of will and endurance they cost him—remains in fragments of a diary which he kept in the early months of this year. Going on into the summer when the "vicious circle of pain-dope-pain-more dope" again grew critical, the diary tells of engagements for meetings, film shows and visits, for sales of the Association's journal *Spain Today*, of books just read, with his brief, sharp comments, of springing ideas and hopes.

On Friday, January 19th, a note records: "Went to Kentish Town YCL to their Burns Nicht. Being readings from his poems and some remarks on his life by HF. Discussion lively, some unclarity, most accepting bourgeois estimation of Burns, i.e. Don Juan and Drunkard i.e. Playboy. The comrades danced a reel which Rose Kerrigan put them through. Gave out dozen petitions against sending ambassador to Spain.

"Monday, 22nd: Went to IBA in afternoon and stayed till eleven writing envelopes and folding. Such an empty, boring job I don't know.

"Tuesday, 23rd: Make statement on situation in Spain and our work. Only 13 comrades present.

"Wednesday, 24th: Send notices for London Committee. Went to office about 4.30. No sooner arrived than was very sick,

followed by an unpleasant accident, so home again I had to go. Had an evening of pain. Not much, but disturbing likewise was the night, so had little sleep which always spoils the next day for am never fully alive, can't think or remember . . .

"Thursday, 25th: Must be at —— to go around getting jumble. Read a lot of Burns last night and into early hours of the morning, and liked it and was a bittish homesickish, but pleasantly. Next time return to the auld toon must stay long enough to get my accent back again for am sure I could.

"Saturday, 27th: Read lots of Burns. When you come to think of it you realise that the bourgeoisie not only sanctify revolutionaries but if they can they Don Juan and drunkify them. So cleverly with Burns that even comrades say 'despite being a playboy and a drunkard he was yet a great and at times a revolutionary poet'. But rarely go to him for inspiration. We have to claim and capture Burns for our movement. It is a sign of Burns' strength that they could not sanctify him.

"Wednesday, 31st: Pain! Pain! Pain! Lots and lots of pain. That was yesterday.

"Sunday, February 4th: The pain, the pain, the pain, mad it will drive me mad. Had a pleasant evening at Tess's place. Tess is to me a tonic first class. We discussed and argufied until if not blue then red in the face.

"Monday, 5th: China Meeting, Hampstead Town Hall. Terrific meeting, the large hall was brimful and the content was equally good.

"Friday, 16th: Branch meeting. Couldn't go—it's too far for me to walk and H who promised to take me didn't—suppose he forgot like he does at times with the literature.

"Saturday, 24th: Social Orange Tree, got drunk on champagne, but there was nothing sham about the pain I had the next morning.

"Sunday, 25th: Pain all day so could not go to Ex-Servicemen's Demonstration. Drink caused pain, am sure.

(No date.) "In the last two hours I have taken 20 physeptone and am writing this with one eye closed and the other screwed

up so that I won't go off the straight and narrow. Spasm so strong that am virtually paralysed and yet I cannot lie still. Must twist and turn, trying this side then the next, on to my back. Then I start cycling vigorously with leg in the air, and then the vice-like spasm which not only seems to paralyse but cuts with razorlike sharpness and burns as witches must have felt it in the hey-day of orthodox Catholicism.

"And then, oh bliss, the spasm ends and bliss it is indeed. In that moment I snatch at life and try to live it enjoy it make it fruitful."

A passage in the diary for June records this:

"Saturday: Had wonderful sleep last night. If I could sleep like this every night I'm certain that I would be a new man and it would be so much easier to have a big smile everywhere and everytime for everybody.

"Sunday: Went all of 17½ hours without dope yesterday and 12½ just before that. Am hoping feverishly that this is but the beginning of a long, long spell of ease from pain, and so also from the dreadful drug, so deadening, not alone to the pain but to all mental action."

Mental action—how full of meaning was this phrase used by Jack. Once he wrote from hospital how he spent whole days feeling sorry for himself, "longing and yearning to be out of bed, to be in London, to be at work". The need to be up and doing was of his element. Equally so was the sense of purpose, the idea militant, that flowed in his deeds, moved others to action, and brought to the most casual acquaintance with whom he spoke some living piece of the great, human, Communist vision that filled his horizon.

Barred by his injury from a man's normal life, from the love of women, from the ordinary home life whose savour he so richly appreciated, he yet never knew the cripple's bitterness or

the narrowing outlooks of an invalid. As his last summer began his thoughts turned more and more keenly to the home in Whithorn, to the wee fellah John, his nephew, to the simple folks from whose midst he came, and to his old hope of a long holiday there "lying in the glorious lifegiving sun until am brown all over, until am done in fact".

At the end of July, 1950, he returned to Scotland, for a holiday with Margaret and John. A week later he had one of his sharp relapses. His brother recalls:

"He couldn't eat, the sweat was just pouring off him. And Hughie Boyce said: 'Would ye no see the doctor?' But Geordie said a local doctor would be of no use to him, he would know more about it himself. You never got a full conversation with him without pain. He would stop for a minute or two and then carry on. But he didna like you to do too much for him, he liked to do it himself."

Then he was better. In a letter to Chris Maxwell in London written early in August he spoke of the "tremendous improvement in my health since I came".

"It really is phenomenal; am now eating hearty meals and enjoying it like in Czecho; nor do I need sleeping tablets for I sleep like a top. Today there is a footba' match at the local pitch so am for having a look. So far have only got one new *Worker* reader. He has collected a number of peace signatures on the job. Am hoping to see some others over the weekend."

And Margaret remembers:

"I was in bed for a fortnight and he was cook. He was a good nurse too. While he was there he was getting better all the time. At first he could only get as far as the corner. Our aunt Nannie lived just up the road and it used to take us a couple of hours to

get there; and just before he died he could get up there in a couple of stops. He carried a peace petition in his pocket and if he met anyone he asked them to sign it; and he gave some to John and he carried them around."

The weather, which had been bad, improved, and in the afternoons he was out in the garden playing with four-year-old John. John talked later of the "secrets" his uncle told him in the golden sunshine, things he would not reveal. They perhaps existed—or they may only have been the proprietary mark which so many children felt they must try to put on the wounded one-legged soldier who joined in their games with his deep, jolly laugh and fanciful humour.

In a letter in August he writes with understanding of his friends' difficulties in the village. "I have to kinda agree with the lads here," he says, "because am sure it would be a long hard job to get things really moving here." But the light of battle fills this letter, as he adds:

"I disagree with them when they say as they always do that 'it is impossible'. Nor can I convince them, and I have argued again and again with them, but they are at a stage where the question of Socialism is to them a question of propaganda i.e. a question of getting people believing or agreeing with them . . . I continually point out that mere talking, no matter how brilliant, will never of itself win the people. And in a sense this has a good side to it. For if talk, therefore propaganda, was sufficient, the workers would never be anything but Tories—who have far greater avenues of disseminating their ideas. In a place like this, and am sure in all such places, there are a thousand simmering issues we could get the workers boiling over about . . .

"Despite their pessimism they have got nearly three sheets of peace signatures and about £1 in donations, and they are only started. I met M, the trapper, on Saturday night. He's a queer cove. Was active in the movement in the 1930's in Canada where

he worked in the lumber camps. He is a lone bird, prefers to do things on his ownsome because then he cannot be let down.

"Actually all of them are kind of proud of the fact that they are the only ones who have seen the light and they are a closed fraternity. It would be a terrible blow to their exclusiveness if the masses tried to get into their circle. This is quite a big weakness . . .

"Am venturing up the toon the day tae see ma ould aunt. Yae should see her, she's a character and what a story she can tell, but oh the language, the cursing and blinding—but you would never hear her for she would be so polite and would talk posh to you as to any stranger and you would miss a treat."

It seemed that the miracle of recovery had happened again. He was up and doing. Looking up former pals, making new comrades, going the rounds with his *Daily Worker*s and his peace petitions, stirring up hope and fire and longings in the kitchen debates amid a circle of friends that went on nightly in his brother's home into the early hours of the morning.

Eyes shining and high forehead commanding attention, he would read aloud his favourites from the well-thumbed copy of Burns, stop now and then as pain caused his frame to tighten, and then go on in ringing voice:

"And as he was singing the tears fast down came,
There'll never be peace till Jamie comes hame,
The Church is in ruins, the State is in jars;
Delusions, oppressions and murderous wars;
We darena weel say't, though we ken wha's to blame—
There'll never be peace till Jamie comes hame . . .

"Now life is a burthen that bows me down,
Since I tint my bairns and he tint his crown;
But till my last moments my words are the same—
There'll never be peace till Jamie comes hame."

And usually he would read the poem that of late years he had scarcely written a letter without quoting:

> "It's comin' yet for a' that,
> That man to man, the world o'er,
> Shall brothers be for a' that."

They cannot stay the day, he would tell his aunt Nannie, "no matter how many atom bombs they have, they canna' stay the day." Then he would at once launch off into an account of his months in Czechoslovakia, how the people there "live without bosses and better than they ever dreamed to do", how one day "our own people will rise up in anger and throw off the profiteers and warmongers who have been too long sitting on our back".

On Wednesday, September 5th, in a gay letter full of news of better health and appetite and listing a number of "desperate wants" he wrote:

"Am writing this in the garden for it is such a lovely day, sun is just pouring down. It's the loveliest day we have had to date, by christ we need it. There are so many distractions out here. The most persistent being the cat, which makes a fierce frontal attack upon me if I don't play with him all the time. It's a lovely little kitten and like a little panda, so he's called Pandi. We have lots of fun. Next to Pandi is the sun; it is fierce too; and then there is the wee fellah, he is continually shooting me cos am the bad yin and he's the sherrif. Still despite these elemental forces am getting on with this letter as well as I could expect."

The great heart, the pleasure in living with friends, the single aim unshadowed by the smallest fanatic touch, burned steady as ever. But ten-fold mortal hurts, fought off for so long, were closing in on the terrible stout wean. Four days after this letter the end came.

It came a few hours after one of the "Burns nichts" in the kitchen at Whithorn. His brother remembers:

"That night he went to Margaret who was ill in bed, just before he went to his room, and said: 'Have you everything you want?'

"He was alright. Him and I was sitting till about two in the morning. And the next time I saw him was about nine in the morning—he was sitting in bed dead.

"We used to make a cup of tea on Sunday mornings before we had our breakfast and that Sunday morning I got up about seven and I looked at the clock and I said 'Oh to hell, it's too early' and I went back to bed. Then I went in about nine to take him a cup of tea. I got hold of his hand and said 'here's your tea, boy' and the hand just fell back. And I dropped the dishes and ran in to Margaret's room and I said: 'I think Geordie's dead'.

"And she said: 'He canna be.'

"And I went back in and he was dead right enough. The doctor said he thought he died about seven. The curtain was torn off—he must have tried to open the window . . ."

Man's dearest possession is life; and since it is given to him to live but once, he must so live as not to be seared by the shame of a cowardly and trivial past; so live as to have no torturing regrets for years without purpose, so live that dying he can say, "All my life and all my strength were given to the finest cause in the world, the liberation of mankind." And one must hurry to live.

So lived Jack Brent and so died.

JACK BRENT, fighter of the International Brigade in Spain, died in 1951. His friends got together to prepare this memorial. It is a book which will be a source of courage and faith to all who read it.

Desperately wounded in the battle of Jarama in February, 1937, Jack Brent returned to England and from that time till his death nearly fifteen years later was in and out of hospital—more often in than out—crippled and continually in severe pain.

His story is the story of a man who never lost heart but kept on fighting. He served as secretary of the International Brigade Association, played a great part in the campaign to secure the release of International Brigaders from fascist concentration camps, kept up a regular *Daily Worker* pitch. During the blitz on London in 1940 he played a leading part in organising the fight for proper conditions for the shelterers in the Underground stations.

Extracts from many of his letters written in hospital are included, and show how keenly from his bed he followed and understood every phase of the struggle. This is a truly inspiring book, one on no account to be missed.